

With both People and Government

‘Ādil Imām and the renegotiation of national consensus



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Abstract

For the last thirty years the comedian ‘Ādil Imām, has been the most popular star of the Egyptian film industry. On the one hand his films claim to be bold: they take the side of the ordinary Egyptian, denounce corruption and suppression, and stand up against nouveaux riches, police, power and government. Simultaneously ‘Ādil Imām has also supported the regime, especially in their fight against ‘Islamist terrorists’. The support ‘Ādil Imām offers the regime is often seen as contradictory to the social and political criticism apparently present in his films.

In this thesis I am therefore asking to what extent ‘Ādil Imām’s films really are critical. By analysing his films starting from 1991 and up to present, I have attempted to show that his political and social criticism, although it is bold and confrontational, always is morally and nationalistically based, and that his films by criticising, not the system but, deviations from it, contribute to, and uphold dominant cultural and political concepts and thus don’t challenge hegemony. My argument is that the ideology in his films is modernist and based on a specific value-system. In accordance with this value-system positively charged ‘traditional’ values are combined with western knowledge and education. Deviations are accordingly criticised for lacking one, or both, of these two factors; either sound traditional values or knowledge. I claim that this enlightened but also thoroughly conservative discourse constitutes a ‘cultural hegemony’ in Egypt, and that the way ‘Ādil Imām’s films contribute to this hegemony can serve as an illustration of Gramscian ideas on how a modern state’s power is upheld through consent rather than force.

Notes on transliteration

All Arabic names, words and titles will be given in transliteration. Although some titles are in Egyptian Arabic I have chosen, as far as possible, to give all titles and names in Modern Standard Arabic. Egyptian Arabic will only be used when citing oral sources.

With the exception of the Arabic letters ش, خ, ث, ذ and غ, in my transliteration I will adhere to the principle of one sign for each Arabic consonant.

ء	'	د	d	ض	ḍ	ك	k
ب	b	ذ	dh	ط	ṭ	ل	l
ت	t	ر	r	ظ	ẓ	م	m
ث	th	ز	z	ع	ʿ	ن	n
ج	j or g*	س	s	غ	gh	ه	h
ح	ḥ	ش	sh	ف	f	و	w
خ	kh	ص	ṣ	ق	q	ي	y

* I will keep the Egyptian pronunciation of the Arabic letter ج as 'g' in the transliteration of Egyptian names and titles. The letter will be reproduced as 'j' in the transliteration of other Arabic words and terms.

Long vowels:	ā, ī and ū.
Diphthongs:	aw and ay (ō and ē may occur when transliterating Egyptian)
The definite article:	al- (will not be assimilated) (il- when transliterating Egyptian)
Tā' marbūṭa:	-a (in plausal form) / -at (in iḍāfa) (-it in iḍāfa when transliterating Egyptian)
Nisba-ending:	-ī (masc) and -iyya (fem)
Hamza:	will not be written when initiating a word.

Names and titles: As I consider the stage-names of Egyptian stars and actors trademarks, they will always be in transliteration and fully spelled out. It will therefore always be 'Ādil Imām and never only Imām. Concerning the names of scholars and sources I will follow the usual practice for academic writing and only give the complete name at its first occurrence. As for the titles of films and songs, I will always place the English name in italics. The original Arabic title will only be given in brackets when I mention the film for the first time.

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Abstract.....	v
Notes on transliteration.....	vii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Thesis	2
Sources and Approach.....	3
CONTEXTS	4
General.....	4
Popular culture	4
Modernism as dominant ideology	5
Stars	8
Censorship and limitations to the sayable	11
Pre 1990s ‘Ādil Imām biography	12
Disūqī Affandī – a lone voice protesting against modernism.....	12
<i>The School of Troublemakers</i> and the change of paradigm	13
The Ragab Trilogy and centrifugal cinema	15
Action hero and underclass desperado.....	17
MAIN SECTION: THE POST-1990 FILMS.....	19
The consciousness of the nation	19
Egypt is in danger – a patriotic alliance against corruption	19
Social chaos / Social harmony.....	29
Conclusion.....	40
Fundamentalism as the enemy.....	41
Asyūṭ appearance	42
Cinema confronting fundamentalism	44
<i>The Terrorist</i>	44
<i>Birds of Darkness</i>	47
The polemic against the fundamentalist	49
The discourse of national unity.....	58
<i>Hassan and Murqus</i>	60
Conclusion.....	66
Renewed anti-modernism.....	67
Conclusion.....	73
‘Ādil Imām – a ‘godfather’ of the nation	74
<i>The Danish Experiment</i>	76
<i>Morgan Ahmed Morgan</i>	79
Conclusion.....	85

Politics the official way	86
‘Ādil Imām and Normalisation.....	87
<i>The Embassy is in the Building</i>	88
Has ‘Ādil Imām become a spokesman of the regime?	95
<i>The Yacoubian Building</i> and reformist cinema	100
CONCLUDING REMARKS	108
NOTES	114
BIBLIOGRAPHY	131

Introduction

For over thirty years the comedian ‘Ādil Imām, the Boss (*al-za‘īm*) or The Star of Stars (*nigm al-nugūm*), as he is often called in Egypt, has been the biggest and best-paid star in Egyptian cinema. Not infrequently his films have proved controversial. He has been tackling issues such as Islamism, corruption, fraud at parliamentary elections, Egyptian-Israeli relations and, lately, Coptic-Muslim relations. Several of his films have been scripted by writers who are usually identified as leftists, pitting ‘Ādil Imām against nouveaux riches, police, power and government. Many would therefore see his films as dealing with contemporary socio-political issues in a bold and confrontational way. But while, in one way or another, most of his films are anti-establishment, making fun of government officials and the system as a whole, he is increasingly being perceived as one of the regime’s most loyal supporters. According to business tabloids he can pick up the phone and dial up the interior minister (Stephen Negus, 1997). But even though he has become a part of the same establishment as many of his films make fun of, or *bitā‘ al-ḥukūma* (belonging to the regime) as it would be termed locally, it doesn’t seem that his popularity with audiences has suffered any harm. Although he has had his downs, he remains, at an age of seventy years, the best- paid actor in Egypt. A question many ask themselves is, therefore, how he has managed to remain the most beloved star of the people for thirty years while at the same time managing to please the regime. How can this be possible? How is he balancing the scales? What are the ideological messages he is projecting that apparently make both people and regime feel good about his social criticism? Are there changes or developments in his approach and, if so, to what factors can these changes be ascribed? Can his films be read as counter-hegemonic – an impression they indeed sometimes give – or do they, as might be expected from a popular culture industry in an undemocratic environment, rather operate as mediators of dominant national, cultural and political discourses, and if so, what are these discourses? The question is therefore to what extent do the films of ‘Ādil Imām disseminate dominant cultural values and ideology or, more specifically, support the current regime?

Thesis

In order to answer the above questions, I will examine the ideological messages that are conveyed through both 'Ādil Imām as a star and his films. In order to highlight the close connection between politics and art in Egypt I will do a contextual reading of different aspects of his films, as well as discuss relevant extra-textual aspects of 'Ādil Imām's persona, in order to place them in their proper socio-political framework and see what kind of representation of contemporary Egypt and its predicament these films project.

My hypothesis is that his films can be read as an attempt to renegotiate a national consensus, to find common ground in an era when it could seem that former ideologies like Nasserism and Arab socialism are being replaced by structural adjustment, and in which Islamism and globalisation have become serious competitors to developmental modernism. By analysing his films from the early 1990s to the present, I will attempt to show that, in most of them, he points out deviations from the system, that he draws up lines against internal and external others and that, by situating himself between these various deviations, he points out a 'middle road' based on enlightened but conservative values. I further hold that he presents himself as a voice of both reason and patriotism and that, by recollecting the scattered pieces of a fragmented nation, pointing out its 'rotten' pieces and calling on their reform, he projects a picture in which, after all, social harmony can be regained or maintained within the national community.

In doing this I will show how nationalism and patriotism have remained a bridge over the gap between regime, common people and cultural elite, and that 'Ādil Imām, who initially was perceived as a 'subversive' figure, from the early 1990s again has become a carrier of this hegemonic discourse. I will attempt to explain this as a result of the regime's cultural policy and need for support by its cultural players on the one hand, while on the other hand I will take into consideration cinema's own commercial interests and its need to make films that bring in revenues. I hope this thesis can contribute to a better understanding of both the relationship between politics and cinema in Egypt in particular, and of the important role popular cinema indeed plays in disseminating and negotiating political discourses generally, and especially in Egypt. Egypt's large cinematic production is potentially one of the regime's most important means of influencing the population and 'Ādil Imām plays an important role within this system.

Sources and Approach

The thesis will basically concentrate on analysing the films in which ‘Ādil Imām starred during the period concerned. These films (16 in total¹) will be my primary sources. I will also support my analysis with newspaper articles, reviews and interviews from the local press. My thesis will be heavily based on Walter Armbrust’s notion of modernism as a main paradigm through which Egyptian popular culture can be viewed. Armbrust (1996, p. 7) claims that modernity “is the key to mediated popular culture” in Egypt. I will add to him Gramscian terms of ‘hegemony’ and ‘dominant culture’, taking Armbrust’s modernism as ‘dominant culture’ while its opposite has the potential of being ‘subversive’ or challenging this ‘dominant culture’. Due to restricted space, I will not be able to deal with all of ‘Ādil Imām’s films with the same amount of detail, and I will therefore concentrate on those films that are most relevant to my thesis or that, due to their box-office success and popularity, must be taken into account. Although I know that ‘Ādil Imam’s fame probably rests equally much on his plays as on his films,² I have decided to basically leave his plays out of this study. The plays are initially seen by a much narrower audience – his later plays also seem to adhere to a largely non-Egyptian Arab audience – and it is only after they have been taken off the stage and released on video or shown on television that they become known to the general public. I will therefore concentrate on the films and only take the plays into consideration as an extra-textual aspect when the need arises.

In analysing the films in question I will consider them as ‘texts’ and therefore look at the normal literary aspects such as plot, character and narrated space and time. I will also look at symbols and metaphors and try to relate the messages to, and explain them on the background of, their socio-political contexts. The focus will be on what main messages can be extracted from these films and how these messages relate to the regime’s policy and interests on the one hand and the way modernism is reflected in them on the other. The intertextual aspect of my analysis will be a comparative work concentrating on how these films relate to each other and, more especially, to other ‘Ādil Imām films that precede our period of study. This will enable me to detect ruptures, changes and continuations in relation to his older films. My goal will be to attempt to extract a coherent structure in these films’ ideological outlook and political criticism, and see how this relates to that of the regime and the elite.

Contexts

General

Cinema is a powerful tool of cultural production. Moreover, Egypt is the only Arab country that has a cinema industry in the true sense of the word. It is therefore likely that, specifically in Egypt, cinema plays an important role in shaping identity and disseminating ideologies. Benedict Anderson (1983) stressed the centrality of the role of the ‘communicative space’, and especially the role of the novel, in the process of nation formation. Eric Hobsbawm (1990) adds to this argument that communication functions not only in the creation of a nation, but also in maintaining it (Lina Khatib, 2006, p. 167). Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994, p. 103) claim that “cinema partly inherited the function of the novel” noted by Anderson. “The Cinema’s institutional ritual of gathering a community – spectators who share a region, language and culture – homologizes, in a sense, the symbolic gathering of the nation” (ibid). While a novel is consumed in solitude, a film is enjoyed collectively. Cinema can therefore “play a more assertive role in fostering group identities” (ibid). Moreover, “cinema is not premised by literacy” (ibid) (an important point in Egypt with its small reading public) and is therefore, as a popular entertainment, more accessible than literature (ibid). In this sense, cinema becomes a space for the creation, maintenance and re-envisioning of a nation or the ‘imagined community’.

Popular culture

Having established cinema’s potential role in shaping the collective imagination and in disseminating ideologies, a much-debated question is whether popular or mass culture – of which these films are definitely part – is inherently conservative, or whether it can be subversive as well. In their 1943 essay *The Cultural Industry* Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that, by its very nature, popular culture consolidates hegemony. They see popular culture as an industry producing “safe, standardised products geared to the larger demands of the capitalist economy” (Simon During, 1993, p. 29), and they would probably have denounced these films as ‘bread and circus’ – cultural goods to manipulate the masses into passivity. Joanne Hollows for her part claims that “popular culture should

not be seen simply as either the means by which dominant groups impose their ideas on subordinate groups, or the way in which subordinate groups resist domination” (Hollows, 2000, p. 27, cited from Viola Shafik, 2007, p. 3). Building on the thoughts of Stuart Hall she instead defines popular culture as “a site of struggle, a place where conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups are played out, and distinctions between the cultures of these groups are continually constructed and reconstructed” (ibid).

There is thus always a political dimension to popular culture. While popular culture can be a way for, in our case, the state or the elite to impose their world view on the masses, forms of popular culture – in our case the films of ‘Ādil Imām – must necessarily also respond to the widespread needs of the public and, in order to be ‘popular’, cannot be completely unauthentic. In my analysis of ‘Ādil Imām’s films, and in order to form an opinion of the extent to which his films reinforce ‘hegemony’ or whether, at times, they also resist domination (i.e. to what extent he is an artist of the government (*fannān al-ḥukūma*) or an artist of the people (*fannān al-sha‘b*)), I will keep this perspective of his films being a site of ‘struggle’ or ‘negotiation’ in mind. But even though his films are a site of ‘negotiation’ and do include subversive messages or jabs in the side of the regime, I will concentrate on the structure of his films’ social and political criticism. Meaning is naturally communicated not only through a narrative’s bits and parts, but also through the structure as a whole. If these films do have a dominant structure that represents hegemony, the subversive bits and parts of them would naturally be isolated and lost in the general structure.

Modernism as dominant ideology

According to Walter Armbrust (1996) the central ideology underlying all mass-mediated popular culture in Egypt is that of a particular notion of Egyptian modernism. This modernism is understood to consist of selected elements of Egyptian cultural heritage (*turāth*) and western cultural and technological influences, held together socially by an imagined alliance between the enlightened, reformist middle class and the uneducated, but decent, ‘common man’ (*ibn al-balad*³). Progress through modern schooling is the intermediary connecting the two. Egyptian modernism is thus a juxtaposition of western technique/high art with Egyptian characters and an element of progress, synthesising the elements into a new middle-class identity. Modernism in Egyptian cinema is in many ways a

‘patterned narrative’ – a kind of myth known throughout the culture and presented in many versions by many tellers (John G. Cawelti, 1979, cited from Armbrust, 1995, p. 82), a common language for both commercial and art productions (Armbrust, 1995, p. 83) and a cultural framework in which these films carry meaning. Protagonists are rooted in positively evaluated tradition and morality and transformed by modern institutions. Using Gramscian terms here, we could call Armbrust’s definition of ‘Egyptian modernism’ as a ‘dominant ideology’: a ‘cultural hegemony’ where power is upheld by consent rather than by force and where popular culture is seen as a site of conflict between hegemonic forces of incorporation and resistance of subordinate groups. Antonio Gramsci’s argument is that “the system’s real strength does not lie in the violence of the ruling class or the coercive power of its state apparatus, but in the acceptance of the ruled of a ‘conception of the world’ [Weltanschauung] which belongs to the rulers” (Fiori 1970, p. 238). The rulers’ or the ruling class’s philosophy or worldview “passes through a whole tissue of complex vulgarizations to emerge as ‘common sense’ (ibid). The ‘philosophy of the ruling class’ is internalised by the majority and becomes the ‘philosophy of the masses’, who accordingly “accept the morality, the customs, the institutional rules of behaviour of the society they live in” (ibid). As cinema in Egypt started in the early 1930s, a period of emerging Egyptian nationalism, and since the group behind this nationalism was the educated elite, it was only natural that modernism, as Armbrust claims (2002b, p.221), was to be the dominant narrative of Egyptian cinema from its beginnings until the 1970s. The ‘common sense’ was the identity of the bourgeoisie, and it was promoted through modernism. Modernism, the ‘imagined alliance’ between the educated reform oriented elite and the common man, is an alliance suited to uphold existing power structures. It claims to speak on behalf of the ‘common man’, the ‘*ibn al-balad*’ shall be polished and elevated in order to become the focal point of identity, and this shall take place under the modernising elite’s leadership. Moreover the ideology legitimises the ruling classes by rooting the western educated elite in Egyptian values.

But the early 1970s witnessed the breakdown of this modernism as the meta-narrative of national identity in Egyptian cinema. There was what could be called a change of paradigm, a switch from a modernist meta-narrative to one which could be called anti-modernist. Although there is no clean dividing line and modernism continued to thrive in official state media, it faded away in commercialised media, where individuals are free to choose what to consume (ibid, p. 240). ‘Dominant ideology’ was being questioned and cracks

appeared in the 'cultural hegemony'. Several reasons for this change of paradigm may be pointed out.

Most commonly cited is the devastating blow that Egypt had received in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, the importance on the cultural scene of which cannot be underestimated. This defeat shattered trust in the regime and its ideology and caused many to question the old cultural formulas (Armbrust, 2002b, p. 240). Even though Egypt managed – as its own state propaganda puts it – to 'restore national prestige' in the October War in 1973, new shocks were to follow. Regional power shifted away from Egypt towards the oil-producing countries and al-Sādāt's 'open door' (*al-infitāḥ*) policy was seen by many as an economic surrender to the west, not to speak of the social turbulence it caused. While "before 1967 Egypt, in its own estimation and in the opinion of many outsiders, seemed to have been on an inexorable path to modernity; after 1973 the pace of change has, if anything, accelerated, and yet it had become more difficult to discern a unifying logic beneath the transformation" (Armbrust, 1996, p. 7). In addition to all these 'sour pills' came the peace negotiations with Israel and Egypt's banishment from the Arab League.

The era of al-Sādāt also saw contradictory cultural policies. On the one hand there was a gradual democratisation of the cultural field. Advance-censorship on the press was lifted in 1974 and that on books in 1977 (Richard Jacquemond, 2008, p. 22). In the wake of the 1970s the regime also reinstated the right of independent contractors to produce in the film, theatre and music industries (*ibid*, p. 42). The period also saw the emergence of new technology that made centralised control of media more difficult (Armbrust, 2002b, p. 240). The state was building down the cultural institutions of the Nasserist regime, breaking with 'Abd al-Nāṣir's nationalist ideology and replacing the previous drive towards modernism with a kind conservatism which may be summarised as 'village morality' (*akhlāq al-qarya*) that al-Sādāt used to praise. These new policies gradually led to a 'divorce' between the cultural elite and the state, which can be considered completed with al-Sādāt's journey to Jerusalem in 1977, which sealed the break between the authorities and the bulk of the intelligentsia (Jacquemond, 2008, p. 24). Gramsci's theory states that 'hegemony' consists of 'domination' plus intellectual and moral direction (Fiori, 1970, p. 243). Direct political dominance or power is only the 'front-line trench'; the 'fortress' being cultural dominance (*ibid*, p. 245). While 'Abd al-Nāṣir in his drive towards modernity had both 'dominated' (exercised power) and 'ruled' (exercised intellectual and moral direction), it could be said that al-Sādāt lost the moral leadership and increasingly had to rely on 'domination'. The

break between state and intelligentsia, which under ‘Abd al-Nāṣir had been united in a drive to uniformity imposed by nationalist ideology, led to the re-emergence of the conflict between ‘high culture’ and ‘vulgar art’ (Jacquemond, p. 42), and this emergence of ‘vulgar art’ or ‘anti-modernism’ was especially to be felt in mass-mediated cultural products such as music and cinema. In the music industry there was a gradual shift symbolised by the rise of urban working-class sha‘bī-singers like Aḥmad ‘Adawiyya and the death and retirement of the old stars of the Nasserist period; in the film industry films appeared which Armbrust (2002b, p. 240) describes as centrifugal: films in which Egypt is torn apart. ‘Ādil Imām was a key player in this kind of cinema (Armbrust, 1998, p. 296). After the 1970s the modernist hero has been either beleaguered or humiliated. These new films were a negation of the old middle-class ideal. As the regime abandoned modernism (the philosophy of the ruling class) and substituted it with conservative ‘village morality’ the intellectuals were left in limbo. The new ‘anti-modernist’ films therefore didn’t construct any alternative ideology. They only described the void left lamenting what was gone. The vacuum that emerged was culturally filled by Islamism, an ideology that gradually was emerging as a new ‘Weltanschauung’ penetrating the minds of the governed.

In the early 1990s, as Armbrust points out, “some Egyptian films began to revisit the sort of modernist narrative common before the 1970s,” and ‘Ādil Imām was again “a conspicuous part of this movement” (Armbrust, 2002b, p.241). He points out that ‘Ādil Imām was by now again projecting a picture of social harmony (Armbrust, 1998), and therefore, as I see it, has transformed himself into a proponent of ‘dominant ideology’. Simultaneously the low opinion that the ‘official’ cultural elite, the carriers of that ‘dominant culture’, held of ‘Ādil Imām changed, but Armbrust claims that this change may have been only temporary (Armbrust, 2002b, p. 241). One of my secondary aims in this thesis will therefore be to show that modernism and patriotism not only temporarily, but permanently, have returned and become a main trait in the films of ‘Ādil Imām.

Stars

As opposed to most film scholars, commercial film audiences view films through their actors or stars and not through their directors. This is also the case in Egypt, where films are recognised by the names of the star performers involved and where locating a film in a video store is achieved by searching for its lead player and not by the name of the director

(Shafik, 2001, p. 711). With a few exceptions, notably the late Yūsuf Shāhīn, who have become celebrities in their own right, in Egypt directors are unknown to the general public.

It was Richard Dyer's *Stars* (1979) that laid the groundwork for star analysis within film studies. While previous studies had largely remained within the domain of fandom focusing on personal biographies, or taking a sociological approach focusing on stars as industrial marketing devices, Dyer in his approach combined semiotics and sociology, introducing the notion of the 'star text'. His approach is to analyse stars as an intertextual construct producing meaning over a range of media (Christine Gledhill, 1991, intr.: xiv). Stars are 'texts' that demand analysis in their own right. So while it is true that stars are products of mass culture and an industrial marketing device, they are also social signs, carrying cultural meanings and ideological values (ibid, intr.: xiii). Viewed from this perspective, stars become an issue in the circulation and negotiation of meaning.

In Egypt stars have become an integral part of public life. Their names and products feature in magazines and newspapers, postcards and posters are sold by street vendors, and huge posters advertising the latest CD or film decorate the cityscape. Film stars are also constantly being re-circulated in other media: they do advertising, feature in TV interviews and take part in talk shows; several of them also periodically host talk shows in Egyptian and other Arab, especially Gulf, TV stations. Thus stars also tend to become a part of daily life's public and private gossip, and many Egyptians and Arabs possess an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of their stars' real and imagined lives. Stars are talked about and discussed, and everybody has an opinion about them.

Stars tend to personalise social meaning and ideologies (ibid, intr.: xiv). They are markers of identity. In Nagīb Maḥfūz's novels people eagerly discuss the singers Muḥammad 'Abd al-Wahhāb and Umm Kulthūm. In doing so they positioned themselves in the ideological completion at the time, between traditional values personalised in Umm Kulthūm and modernism represented by 'Abd al-Wahhāb.

Personalising social meaning and ideology as they do, stars are also likely to become symbolic agents of a people's imagined community (Shafik, 2001, p 712), thus operating as mediators of prevalent cultural discourses. If this is so, stars can be valuable assets in a state's project of self-representation and in shaping and educating its community. This importance of cinema and stars has not escaped the varying regimes in Egypt. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ in particular came to embody the youthfulness and modernity of Nasserist ideology, while Umm Kulthūm, with her more traditional approach and pan-Arabic appeal, toured

the Arab world holding solidarity concerts to collect donations for the state after the 1967 defeat; and there are many indications that 'Ādil Imām has been accorded a similar role in Egypt today. Given these varied roles acquired by stars, it becomes interesting to question exactly which ideological messages and cultural concepts different stars stand for.

From a very early stage Egyptian films not only served the national market, but the country's stars also attracted audiences all over the Arab world, projecting images of Egypt, its ideology and identity. Egyptian stars are therefore not only symbolic agents of the Egyptians' 'imagined community'; they have just as much relevance for non-Egyptian Arab audiences – periphery and centre in the Arab World are bound together through mainly Egyptian stars. It is a commonly held truism that Umm Kulthūm is the only thing Arabs can agree upon. Similarly, 'Ādil Imām's films are just as popular in other Arab countries as they are in Egypt, and his later plays (as is the case with most commercial theatre in Egypt, his plays are staged only in the summer season, when the city is flooded with Arab tourists) seem largely to appeal to a non-Egyptian audience. The presence of stars has subsequently remained essential in promoting both Egyptian films and Egyptian identity in Egypt, as in the rest of the Arab world.

Egyptian film-stars are commonly categorised in a pyramidal structure, divided into three categories based on wages and the actor's role in the narrative (Shafik, 2001, p. 714). For the last twenty years, the very top of this structure has been occupied by 'Ādil Imām. Stars of this top category have a great potential influence on film production itself. Part of this influence derives from their control over the script. The star has to agree to the script before the fund-raising process⁴ can start, and many stars often make a point out of how many scripts they have refused (Shafik, 2001, p. 714). 'Ādil Imām claims that "An actor's most important quality is to be able to say no when producers offer you large amounts of money to make you accept a role" (Hāla Sarḥān, 2006). If a star accepts the screenplay, he will still often have the power to impose himself and his character on the script. 'Alī Idrīs, the director of several of 'Ādil Imām's recent films, admits that even though they had agreed upon everything before starting to film *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* (2007), several disagreements about the way certain scenes were to be filmed occurred; but he explains that, after seeing the final version, he had to admit that 'Ādil Imām was right (Mishēl Nabīl, 2007).⁵ Stars in the top category also occasionally request scripts from scriptwriters, as was the case with, for example, *Bakhit and Adila II* (1997), which, according to 'Ādil Imām, was written at his request ('Alī, 1997). 'Ādil Imām also plays an active role in choosing his co-

stars and actors for the secondary roles,⁶ and he is also known to include new and secondary comedians in his films.

Therefore not only the popular audiences' inclination to see films through their stars, and stars' importance in disseminating meaning and ideology, but also the importance of the stars and their influence on the production itself, legitimise making a star like 'Ādil Imām the focal point of this study and in consequence considering the films as an expressions of his, rather than just the director's or scriptwriter's, outlook.

Censorship and limitations to the sayable

Looking at film in an 'unfree society', as Egypt is in many ways, a few words need to be said about censorship. There are, of course, limits to the sayable. But these limits have been shifting, and the system has become increasingly unpredictable, especially as a result of the fragmentation of the censorship system and the various players claiming the right to censor. Generally speaking, censorship in Egypt is organised around a sort of 'law of decreasing freedom', which states that the greater the audience that can be reached by the means of distribution chosen, the greater the censorship (Jacquemond, 2008, p. 39).⁷

The need for censorship is generally agreed upon in Egypt, and those demanding its complete abolition are few (ibid). The question is rather who should have the right to censor. There are several players in the field. The official censorship authorities, representing the state, are above all concerned with holding direct political criticism at bay and controlling the image of Egypt that reaches the outside world. But here they are often joined by oversensitive and nationalistically minded intellectuals (ibid, p. 40) who not only agree upon the censoring of artistic productions, but who often even pressure the authorities to censor productions. This is certainly the case with many products of popular culture where, as has been pointed out, for several reasons the conflict between 'high' and 'vulgar' culture resurfaced in the 1970s. In addition to the state and the cultural elite there are other players eager to impose their right to censor. These independent players, journalists, lawyers, MPs, independent 'ulamā' but also parents, often with a conservative leaning, have led to the growing unpredictability of the system. These independent players are collectively referred to as 'street censorship'.

Moreover, as Egyptian films are being marketed throughout the Arab world, producers' fear of losing profits, or of being unable to distribute their products in other

Arab countries, is an additional factor that sets limitations to the sayable. But it is not only the Gulf area, an increasingly important market for Egyptian films, which is conservatively inclined; Egyptian audiences are also perceived as being increasingly conservative. Purely commercial interests are therefore just as important as direct censorship in shaping the limits of what can be said, and how. These different variants of censorship and self-censorship are therefore important aspects that need to be taken into account when considering the films' role in 'shaping the community'.

Pre 1990s 'Ādil Imām biography

As has been explained, the stars in commercial cinema are, in themselves 'texts.' These texts are gradually being built up through the audiences' association of the star with his previous roles and gossip about his real or imagined life. In his analysis of the star-saturated Egyptian classic *Candy Floss* [*Ghazal al-Banāt*]⁸ (1949) Armbrust (2000) shows how each actor played on his/her established star persona and previous private and professional relationships with each other, to the extent that some even acted themselves. According to Armbrust, the film was 'intensely reflexive'; it was really not about anything but itself. The casting of a particular star, bringing this star's 'luggage' into a film, is in itself an intertextual act that is appreciated by the audiences. This intertextual appreciation of the star, and the self-referentiality of Egyptian films, is naturally one of the first aspects lost to a foreign audience. To facilitate a better understanding of 'Ādil Imām's character and of his films from the 1990s to the present, I will start with a survey of some of his defining roles preceding the period of study – especially the characters of Disūqī Affandī, Bahgat al-Abāṣīrī and Ragab – and relate them to the paradigm of modernism and anti-modernism. In the following main analysis of his films from the 1990s to date, I will, at several junctions, refer back to these characters insofar as this serves my analysis.

Disūqī Affandī – a lone voice protesting against modernism

The first role to bring 'Ādil Imām to public notice was in the play *Me, Him and Her* [*ana wa-huwwa wa-hiyya*] (1963), a vehicle for comedian Fu'ād al-Muhandis and his wife Shuwaykār, the most successful comedy-duo of the day. 'Ādil Imām played the role of a minor character called 'Disūqī Affandī', a 'simple' uneducated man who is remembered for the line *balad*

shahadāt, ṣaḥīḥ (This is really a country for holders of certificates). Ḥilmī Sālim (1991, pp.67-69) describes Disūqī Affandī as an ordinary citizen in search of a living, but still a citizen who refused to accept humiliation to attain that living. On the contrary, he had his pride, and was convinced that it was circumstances that were against him. In a country where only school certificates count, and where nobody cares about actual abilities, he fought to prove that he was just as able as ‘those with certificates’.

The role earned ‘Ādil Imām a reputation, and when the play was shown on television the following year it became famous all over Egypt. Disūqī Affandī’s lone protest over being left out, in a country which only cares about certificates, sums up the whole middle-class/clerk bias and exaggerated modernist ideology of Gamāl ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s policy of nationalisation. With Disūqī Affandī, ‘Ādil Imām had established himself as a character actor in Egypt and he started to get minor roles in films.

The School of Troublemakers and the change of paradigm

But his real breakthrough was the play *The School of Troublemakers* [*Madrasat al-mushāghhibīn*], which ran from 1971 to 1974, a play that was to become symbolic of the change of paradigm from a modernist narrative to its opposite.

The play revolves around a female teacher’s efforts at the School of Noble Morals (*madrasat al-akhlāq al-ḥamīda*) to tame a number of wild, undisciplined students. But primarily she has to come to terms with the students’ ringleader (*al-za‘īm*) Bahgat al-Abāṣīrī, played by ‘Ādil Imām. In the end she manages to convince them of the value of education, Bahgat loses his self-confidence, asking: “Am I a fake leader (*za‘īm awanṭa*) or what?”, and she succeeds in transforming them into useful citizens. The play thus still paid lip service to modernist concepts, although as a play the actors (‘Ādil Imām, Aḥmad Zakī, Sa‘īd Ṣāliḥ and Yūnis Shalabī) hijacked the script, turning a 90-page script into a four-hour-long play mocking key modernisation institutions like the education system in a way bordering on contempt and even making jokes about the recently deceased ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and the free market economic policies of al-Sādāt (Armbrust, 2002b, pp. 229-30). The play expressed the alienation felt by the younger generation after having lost faith in the future. These students broke the silence and rebelled (Muḥammad al-Rifā‘ī, 1988).

The critics hated the play and most reviewers ignored ‘Ādil Imām and concentrated instead on praising the schoolteacher’s efforts to civilise the boys (Armbrust, 2002, p. 230).

Even ‘Alī Sālim, the writer of the play, refused to have anything to do with it and accused the actors of having destroyed his script. “This was a beautiful play but the actors destroyed it. For three months it was played in the proper way but then the actors started to add by themselves as they saw fit” (‘Alī Sālim, cited from ‘Abd al-Wahhāb al-Sibā’ī, 1997, p. 40).

This play was definitely subversive. It draws its popular appeal precisely from its expression of disrespect for the imposed lessons of educated taste. It clashed with dominant concepts of ‘good taste’ and a certain elitism prevalent amongst a cultural elite who felt that its hegemonic position was under threat and thus “led to interventions from every kind of intellectual, in which criticism of ‘vulgar art’ was accompanied by calls for its censorship vigilance or severity” (Jacquemond, 2008, p. 42). The play is an example of how, at certain moments, popular forms of culture can function as anti-cultures. The play has since come to stand for everything that is wrong in Egypt. The famous ‘cassette-preacher’ of the 1970s, ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Kishk, is known to have lamented the state of the nation by saying: “We have been waiting a just imām (imām ‘ādil), but what we got was ‘Ādil Imām.” The play has been accused both of destroying the Egyptian education system – especially since pupils took expressions, notably those of Bahgat al-Abāṣīrī, picked up from the play into their classrooms – and corrupting Egyptian youth generally (al-Rifā’ī, 1988). Some, like Aḥmad al-Sanhūrī (2008), even go as far as to claim that the whole play is a Jewish conspiracy to break down the Egyptian social fabric. Allegedly, the play was for many years denied TV screening. But interestingly – because of its huge popularity – it has become a symbol for a whole generation and, because it is so rarely shown on television, the regime seems to have screened the play in times of crisis. During the 1977 bread riots the play was shown on state television in an attempt to distract the people’s attention (Muḥammad al-Bāz, 2005). Recalling the riots, the novelist Maḥmūd al-Wardīnī writes that he “had slept through most of the day and that it was only when he turned on the TV at night and found an unscheduled broadcast of a popular play starring ‘Ādil Imām that he felt something was wrong” (al-Wardīnī, 2007). The regime knew that Egyptians would watch the play, and that was what happened (al-Bāz, 2005). Here the subversive play became a traditional ‘bread and circus’ play, used as a tool by the regime to reinforce hegemony.

This play not only established ‘Ādil Imām’s reputation but it also foreshadowed the character he was going to develop in the 1970s, and especially in the 1980s, a character built on absurdism with a strong dose of nihilism and cynicism (Armbrust, 1998, pp. 289 and 299: footnote 11) or *fahlawa* (cleverness). From then on ‘Ādil Imām was the rebel. The play was

also the starting point of the career of all four actors, whose future screen personalities to a large degree was to build on the roles they had acted in the play, thus accounting not only for 'a change of paradigm' but also a generational shift in the Egyptian comedy scene.

The Ragab Trilogy and centrifugal cinema

ʿĀdil Imām got his first lead role in cinema in *Looking for Trouble* [*al-Baḥṭh ʿan al-Faḍīḥa*] in 1973 and has played the lead actor in his films ever since, most of which, if not all, took the 'anti-modernist' message of *School of Troublemakers* further. "When the catastrophe of 1967 struck, it was only natural that figures that expressed the special circumstances of loss and fragmentation should emerge," and "ʿĀdil Imām was the artist that came to express this new reality" (Sālim, 1991, p. 63). The 1970s were the era of the *infitāḥ*, which, according to Sālim, was "an earthquake that turned the social pyramid in Egypt upside down" (ibid, p. 87). He claims that the era saw a new kind of character emerging, a character that Egypt had not known before: the millionaire who starts from zero and in a few years earns millions; and that it was this era that produced *Ragab* (ibid, p. 86). It was the *Ragab* trilogy (*Ragab on a Hot Tin Roof* [*Ragab fawq Ṣaḥīḥ Sākhin*] (1979), *Shaaban below Zero* [*Shāʿbān taḥt al-Ṣifr*] (1980) and *Ramadan on the Volcano* [*Ramaḍān fawq al-Burkān*] (1985))⁹ that finally established ʿĀdil Imām's subversive character as the cynical *fahlawī*, and it was *Ragab* that made ʿĀdil Imām top actor at the box office in Egypt. The film remained running for 33 weeks (Armbrust, 2002b, p. 237). *Ragab*, the ignorant and naive *fallāḥ*, arrives at Cairo Central Station with a bag full of money. His fellow villagers have entrusted him with their money so that he can buy a new tractor for his village in Cairo. At the train station *Ragab* is entrapped by the clever *fahlawī* *Bulbul* (Saʿīd Ṣāliḥ), who cheats him and takes his money. In itself this is nothing new. The naive villager whose naivety is exploited in the big city has long been a stock subject in Egyptian cinema. What is new is that when *Ragab* – who in the film ends up in prison – is finally released, he emulates *Bulbul*: he goes to the same train station to find another naive villager and cheat him (Sālim, 1991, p. 88). The film expressed the 'zeitgeist': in these new circumstances (the era of the *infitāḥ*) hard and honest work could no longer succeed in bringing wealth (ibid). It was the era of the quick million; the era of cheating and cleverness. Cleverness (*fahlawa*) was the new and only valuable qualification (ibid, p. 89).

Armbrust (1996 and 2002b) analyses the Ragab trilogy and compares the films with the modernist/nationalist productions of earlier periods. Comparing *Shaaban Below Zero* with the classic film *If I Were Rich* [*law kunt ghani*] (1942), of which *Shaaban Below Zero* was a remake, Armbrust observes that something had definitely changed. He explains that “The difference is that these new films were anti-modernist – they no longer assume a transformation of the simple *ibn al-balad* into a modern man. Unlike the critics, these films do not blame lower-class victims for falling into immorality due to their ignorance and backwardness. Ragab, Shaaban, and dozens of other films, plays, and songs produced since the mid-1970s are not even primarily about the immorality that critics condemn. Instead, they are about humiliation of the common man and the failure, corruption, or simple nonexistence of modernist institutions that are supposed to prevent it” (Armbrust, 1996, p. 217). From now on variations of Ragab were recurrent themes in ‘Ādil Imām’s films. From now on ‘Ādil Imām’s characters fight off the unfair circumstances that stand in their way and exploit their cleverness (*fahlawa*) to become rich (Sālim, 1991, p. 69). Sometimes they succeed, but often they are outwitted by even more powerful crooks. The notion of *fahlawa* has ever since been an integral part of ‘Ādil Imām’s screen personality.

The ‘Ādil Imām character that emerged at the end of the 1970s and which was arguably the key for his success, was a sympathetic, but in many ways naive and corruptible hero who falls prey to the system, but who also knows how to be clever (*fahlawī*) and play the systems game on his own premises. In attempting to show the whole range of society’s immoral survival strategies, from petty theft to high-level fraud, ‘Ādil Imām frequently dismissed the whole system as corrupt and inefficient (Shafik, 2007, p. 306). But on his way towards corruption he always retains some sympathetic feature – his *ibn al-balad* behaviour (ibid, p. 305) he is loyal, generous and honest towards those who deserve it – family and friends – and audiences sympathise with him. He exploits his cleverness (*fahlawa*) to achieve what is rightfully his, but what circumstances prevent him (and maybe also the audience) achieving through honourable means.

‘Ādil Imām’s lower-class approach and alleged vulgarity in the late 1970s and early 1980s not only clashed with the elitism of the cultural gatekeepers – in this period ‘Ādil Imām became the vulgarian every intellectual loved to hate – but also with a new conservative trend that arose in a kind of reaction to the morally liberal 1970s, and that made itself felt with increasing demands for morality on screen. Several of his films in this period were attacked by conservative and nationalistically inclined third parties, i.e. street-

censorship. In 1983 a furious press campaign against 'Ādil Imām's film *Gate Five* [*Khamisa Bāb*]¹⁰ forced the Ministry of Culture to withdraw the film's licence and prohibit further screening. The pretext was that the film was so sleazy that it had damaged 'Egypt's reputation'. 'Egypt's reputation had at the time become a 'catchword' and an 'excuse' to condemn and censor anything that was deemed either too sleazy or vulgar, or which simply did not conform with dominant concepts of 'good taste'; but also to cover up any kind of embarrassing issues that might have presented Egypt in an unfavourable light. That the accusation of damaging 'Egypt's reputation' was so commonly directed towards 'Ādil Imām'¹¹ by both intellectuals and conservatives confirms 'Ādil Imām's subversive character at the time. While it seems that 'Ādil Imām's films ran into trouble with the cultural elite because of their 'vulgarity', and with conservatives because of their sleaziness, it also seems that his films have only rarely been censored for purely political reasons.¹²

Action hero and underclass desperado

During the 1980s the additional element of action was added to 'Ādil Imām's repertory. In 1981 Samīr Sayf directed *The Suspect* for 'Ādil Imām. This marked the beginning of a fruitful collaboration through which 'Ādil Imām gradually turned to action and gangster films. He became a kind of lower-class desperado fighting other crooks but often being outwitted by even more powerful and professional gangsters. The position of the 'tough guy' in Egyptian cinema that had been held by Farīd Shawqī during the 1960s and 1970s was completely taken over by 'Ādil Imām in the 1980s (Shafik, 2007, p. 305).

In the 1980s 'Ādil Imām became the 'lawyer' of the poor, the tough guy who gave the rich a beating (al-Bāz, 2005). Al-Bāz mentions the film *The Ghoul* from 1983 as an example. In this film 'Ādil Imām, having despaired of the law for not helping him to obtain his rights, takes the law into his own hands and kills the corrupt businessman. 'Ādil Imām becomes the avenger who turns the poor people's impotence into strength on screen. 'Ādil Imām was a 'healing balsam for the weak'. "He was their beloved hero who on their behalf did all they dreamt of but were unable to do. He calmed them down and made reality easier to accept" (ibid). Bilāl Faḍl remembers how, as a youth, he used to watch 'Ādil Imām and identify with the protagonist by laughing, and with the rest of the audience, students, workers, artisans and clerks, cheering every time one of the evil guys was given a hammering by 'Ādil Imām's puny fists (Faḍl, 1996). The transformation into an action-hero helped 'Ādil Imām gradually

to transform his subversive figure into a less ambiguous, and more potent, hero (Shafik, 2007, p. 305), until finally, in the late 1980s, he emerged as the unambiguous 'good hero'. In *The Leopard and the Woman* [*al-Nimr wa-l-Unthā*] in 1987 he had the role of an undercover policeman and in *Shams al-Zinati* [*Shams al-Zinātī*] in 1991 he played a fictive national hero (ibid, p.307).

Main Section: the post-1990 films

The consciousness of the nation

Although the intellectual elite despised his alleged vulgarism and criticised him for his lower-class approach, by gradually converting his character into a more unambiguous ‘good hero’, from the end of the 1980s ‘Ādil Imām started to act in films that were perceived as socially and politically conscious, thus ingratiating himself with the cultural and political establishment. Seemingly without losing his grip on his audiences, he gradually emerged as the hero of the secular state (Armbrust, 1998, p. 296). This media transformation started in 1991 with *Playing with the Grownups*¹³. “This film was received by the critics unlike anything else ‘Ādil Imām had appeared in during the previous twenty years” (Armbrust, 1998, p. 296). This film, together with the following ones, *Terrorism and Barbecue* (1992), *The Forgotten One* (1993) and *Sleeping in Honey*¹⁴ (1996), was no longer ‘centrifugal’ and could therefore account for another ‘change of paradigm’ on behalf of ‘Ādil Imām back to pre-1970s hegemonic discourse of modernism. These four films – all written by the scriptwriter Waḥīd Ḥāmid¹⁵ and directed by the young director Sharīf ‘Arafa – are seen by many as a quartet dealing with the state of the Egyptian citizen in the 1990s. For various reasons, an additional film by the same artistic trio, *Birds of Darkness* (1995), is probably not part of this quartet.¹⁶

In the following sections I will therefore take a closer look at these four films. I will show how modernism has returned and how, unlike many of ‘Ādil Imām’s films in the 1970s and 1980s, they display a patriotic and moral outlook. Through analysis I will attempt to extract the patriotic and moral discourse of these films, closing the chapter with some thoughts on why this type of discourse may again become relevant at this point in history.

Egypt is in danger – a patriotic alliance against corruption

In all four films ‘Ādil Imām is a more or less unambiguously ‘good hero’. Even though the character in the first film, *Playing with the Grownups*, is the one of the four which has retained most from his previous subversive persona, the film was immediately perceived as the beginning of a new era in ‘Ādil Imām’s career. Hishām Lāshīn, for example, writes: “For

years Egyptian cinema has besieged us with quantities of films of which the protagonists were thieves, murderers and parasites. These ‘beloved’ protagonists were also the role models that the producers of cinema wanted our youth to take after, and here lies the real catastrophe of these films. But with *Playing with the Grownups* the honourable protagonist, the patriot who loves his country and defends it in spite of all its faults, has returned” (Lāshīn, 1991). The film itself also includes a marker that can be read to indicate that we now have to do with a different ‘Ādil Imām. In a dialogue in which the officer Mu‘taṣim al-Alfī (Ḥusayn Fahmī) asks Ḥasan Bahlūl (‘Ādil Imām) why he is always fired from every job he has? al-Alfī asks: “So you are a troublemaker (*mushāghhib*)?”, to which ‘Ādil Imām answers: “That was at school” (*da kān ayyām il-madrasa*), making us understand that Bahgat al-Abāṣīrī from the play *The School of Troublemakers* [*madrasat al-mushāghhibīn*] has grown up and definitely changed. But I would claim that this piece of dialogue – which could also be just an intertextual joke – not only has the function of distancing his new character from the subversive Bahgat al-Abāṣīrī, but that it also does the opposite. It reminds the audience of ‘Ādil Imām’s artistic past by bringing this ‘baggage’ into the film and telling them that he is still the same ‘Ādil Imām, thereby giving them a hint as to exactly how they should read him in this film: Even though he now ‘loves his country’ and is going to defend it in spite of all its faults, he is still a *fahlawī*.

Another trait common to these four films is that they all give the impression that Egypt is in some kind of danger: they seemingly call people to wake up from their slumber and speak out. This is probably most clearly stated in the very last scenes in *Playing with the Grownups*, where Ḥasan comes running to the telephone exchange only to find that his friend ‘Alī has been killed. He kneels beside his friend’s body, crying: “We are so small and so miserable (*ghalbānīn*)” before he furiously interconnects all the telephone lines to wake up the city. All phones in Ṭal‘at Ḥarb Square ring simultaneously and Ḥasan shouts: “‘Alī al-Zahhār died, he died because he was dreaming!” The screen then freezes in a final shoot-out in which Mu‘taṣim al-Alfī and Ḥasan stand side by side. Ḥasan screams: “I will continue to dream!” while the police officer continues to fire at those sent to kill them.

Fredric Jameson sees all postcolonial narratives as allegories of the nation claiming, that “the telling of an individual story cannot but ultimately involve the whole laborious telling of the experience of the collectivity itself” (Jameson, 1986, pp. 85-86). This view has been criticised for being a ‘hasty totalization’, but Ella Shohat and Robert Stam (1994, p. 272) point out that this “allegorical tendency available for all art becomes exaggerated in the

case of repressive regimes, perhaps especially where intellectual filmmakers, profoundly shaped by nationalist discourse, feel obliged to speak for and about the nation as a whole.” It seems clear that the artistic trio behind these films felt such an obligation, and the allegorical tendency is clearly present in all four films.

Ḥasan Bahlūl claims to ‘dream’ about future incidents threatening Egypt’s security. When he ‘dreams’ that a plastic factory at kilometre 38 on the Desert Road is going to burn down the next day at 10.30, he informs State Security (*amn al-dawla*). His case is dealt with by the enlightened officer Mu‘taṣim al-Alfī: an officer who, contrary to what is expected of Egyptian State Security, rejects what he calls ‘old methods’ and torture, which according to him have never brought results. When the factory burns down exactly at the time Ḥasan had claimed, the officer has to take Ḥasan’s ‘dreams’ seriously. Together the two form a team: the ‘wakeful eyes’ both of the people (*‘ayn al-balad*) and of the government (*‘ayn al-ḥukūma*), the consciousness of the nation guarding the public interest, opening fire at all who play with Egypt’s destiny and economy. People and government hand in hand: a complete body, with two watchful eyes.¹⁷ Whereas the helping hand of the modernist institutions elevating and protecting the ‘common man’ were absent in the *Ragab* films, and the popular hero had to indulge in immorality and corruption to avoid humiliation, in *Playing with the Grownups* the ‘common man’ and the state stand together to fight immorality and corruption in the name of the nation.

In *Playing with the Grownups* this patriotic quest of fighting evil is linked to symbols of national identity. While this connection was non-existent in the *Ragab* films, it is re-introduced in this film. Ḥasan meets his friend ‘Alī al-Zahhār (Maḥmūd al-Gindī) – the real source of his ‘dreams’ – at the Sound and Light Show below the Pyramids, in front of the Sphinx. ‘Alī is a telephone operator working at the Cairo telephone exchange, where he taps phone calls. With the Pyramids in the background, Ḥasan repeats after the Sphinxes in classical Arabic:

“I am the faithful guardian in the hands of my master
Guarding him ... Close to him
Sacrificing myself for him
Even my face carries his features
I am the keeper of Pharaoh. I am the Pharaoh (lifting his hand as if swearing an oath)
People have idolised me since the dawn of history
Although my names have differed over the ages”

Ḥasan is a 'faithful guardian' in the hands of his master. Like the Sphinx stand guard in front of the Pharaohs' graves, Ḥasan is always close to, and willing to sacrifice himself for, his country. Through this scene his mission is connected with the 'glorious past' of the Pharaohs: he even 'carries their features'. It is as if he is part of an unbroken chain of guardians to whom the covenant, the 'eternal cause' of the nation, has been passed on. But Ḥasan continues to recite, now improvising:

"I am Ḥasan Bahnasī Bahlūl
I am the poor in this age
Surrounded by illusions
I am the one who if starve, goes to sleep [hungry]
I am deceived by words"

If the scene is read as a national narrative, connecting Ḥasan with the Pharaohs, it here becomes clear that somewhere the narrative has gone astray. He shouts to his friend: "'Alī! I have been robbed!", indicating that the glorious past is no longer there. Ḥasan ironically comments that "It is good that [at least] the Pyramids and the Sphinx have not been stolen," and asks: "Does everything in our country have to be of stone [i.e. worthless] if it is not to be stolen? Even love and good will (*al-rūḥ al-ḥilwa*) have been stolen." Thereafter Ḥasan and 'Alī, determined to fight 'the robbers', walk out into the darkness with the Sphinx continuing to recite in the background

"Civilisations are nothing but oases in a desert of ignorance
Were not their builders but human beings like us,
who made these monuments so that their names should live
and their glory defeat everything?"

The audience is made to understand that Ḥasan is part of a civilising quest. 'The builders [of civilisation] were only human beings like us', and if the Pharaohs 'were only human beings like us', the shortcomings must be 'ours'. The nation is a covenant which has been passed down to us, and we have failed to live up to it. In the following scene Mu'taṣim al-Alfī is waiting for Ḥasan in the local coffee shop (*qahwa*) with the voice of Umm Kulthūm singing in the background.¹⁸

But State Security naturally does not believe in Ḥasan's dreams, and is therefore determined to find Ḥasan's real source of information. A scene in which Mu'taṣim al-Alfī sits with Ḥasan Bahlūl, trying to convince him to reveal his real source of information, is – certainly not without purpose – located under the statue of Ṭal'at Ḥarb in central Cairo.

Ṭal'at Ḥarb was the founder of the Egyptian National Bank (*Bank Miṣr*) and is one of the key icons of Egyptian modernism and national economic development. Ḥasan refuses to reveal his source, claiming that even if it were to be revealed it would be of no legal use anyway (tapping telephone lines is, of course, illegal), and that “To follow the law in many cases is in the criminal’s interest.” He then rhetorically asks the officer: “How many corruption cases have failed because of mistakes in procedure?” Ḥasan thereafter attracts the attention of a poor street sweeper. “Tell him!” he says. He then looks up at the statue, now as though complaining to Ṭal'at Ḥarb himself: “Tell him, Uncle Ṭal'at!” He then jumps onto a municipal vehicle which, just as Ḥasan wants to clean Egypt of corruption, cleanses the streets of Cairo. Before walking away into darkness he tells the officer: “You’d better ask the law-makers how they can make dreams a legal asset (*sanad qānūnī*) acceptable in court.” Here the dream not only refers to the information Ḥasan ‘dreams’ and passes on to State Security, but also alludes to all of his class’s dreams of social justice, and ultimately to Egypt’s collective dream of progress: a dream which is greater and more just than the details of law. These scenes clearly place duty and responsibility over rights. So although the film is sympathetic with, and expresses the plight of, the common man, the focus is on encouraging him to increased loyalty.

Through these scenes Ḥasan’s cause is linked with the long history of national progress. Continuity, or a chain, is established from the Pharaohs, the cradle of the Egyptian nation, through the modernisers of the *nahḍa*, represented here by Ṭal'at Ḥarb and Umm Kulthūm, to Ḥasan Bahlūl and the people. In a typical fashion of Egyptian modernism elements of the Egyptian heritage (*turāth*) endow Ḥasan, the decent common man, with legitimacy. The police officer Mu'taṣim al-Alfī represents the ‘educated modern man’. Thus with the ‘element of progress’, all elements (the imaginary alliance between the common man with his values and the modern educated man through heritage and progress) of Egyptian modernism are united. But while this kind of modernism was an implicit discourse underlying earlier pre-1970s films, it is explicitly stated in a bold and confrontational manner in *Playing with the Grownups*. Ḥasan Bahlūl and Mu'taṣim al-Alfī are, in the words of the Sphinx, ‘nothing but oases in a desert of ignorance’. Egypt is in danger and moving in the wrong direction, and the modernist alliance does not take its ultimate triumph for granted. It is a defensive alliance intending to save what is left, blow life into a dead body and recoup modernism in order to put Egypt back on the right track, that of progress.

Who has caused Egypt to deviate from its path towards modernity and turned the country into a 'desert of ignorance' or, in Ḥasan's words, who are the thieves that have robbed him and Egypt of their dream? In *Playing with the Grownups* their identity is not fully revealed, but looking at the threats that Ḥasan is reporting to State Security can provide some hints. The burning of the plastic factory was ordered by a large wholesale importer wanting to get rid of local competition, thus destroying national production and hampering Egypt's industrialisation. Thereafter they avert a planned assassination of a political refugee: something that would have damaged Egypt's self-perception as 'an island of peace and stability' in a turbulent region; and they arrest an Egyptian MP who arrives at Cairo airport with his suitcase full of heroin. In *Playing with the Grownups* the identity of the really 'big sharks' or the grownups who are behind these threats remains undisclosed. They are seen only briefly in a scene following the arrest of the MP. Two of these big 'sharks' are jogging at the Gazīra Club in Zamālik. As they are only seen from behind, their identity remains undisclosed. They discuss the case of the arrested parliamentarian: "He really shouldn't have entered parliament on the majority list. He should have been on the list of the Opposition, so that when trouble like this happens we could have claimed that it was a governmental conspiracy." These 'robbers', who stole 'the dream of Egypt', seem to be within and above both regime and people. They are all those who place their personal interest above that of the nation and thus hamper its progress. But both among the people and within the regime there are also honourable and loyal people, represented here by Ḥasan Bahlūl and Mu'taṣim al-Alfī.

The identity of the 'robbers' is more greatly elaborated upon through As'ad Bēh (Karam Muṭāwī'), the multimillionaire businessman and his gang in the film *The Forgotten One*. I would suggest that As'ad Bēh represents the same category of people. Celebrating his birthday party at his countryside estate, he plans to sell a prominent invitee from the Gulf a factory. To conclude the deal he tries to force Ghāda, his secretary, to prostitute herself to his guest. Selling off national industries for personal profit – here even through pimping – or burning them down for the same reason, as in *Playing with the Grownups*, is morally the same.

The world of the wealthy is decadent, westernised and egoistic. The foreignness of this class is emphasised from the very beginning of the film. When Ghāda presents her boss with lists of people to be invited to the birthday party, As'ad Bēh is interrupted by a telephone call. He answers in fluent Italian. When they discuss the lists, As'ad Bēh protests

at her suggestion of inviting some ex-ministers. According to him, “Ministers in our country are like matches: they only light once,” indicating that personal profit is the only thing that counts: once a minister is out of office he is no longer of use. The Minister of Religious Endowments (*awqāf*) is also unwelcome. As‘ad Bēh comments: “You want to invite the Minister of Religious Endowments to a party like ours?” Obviously the party is going to be a decadent affair. This becomes even clearer as As‘ad Bēh adds that Ghāda should not forget to invite three or four homosexuals: they ‘spice up any party’ (*fakhit kull ḥafla*).

As‘ad Bēh is not only westernised, decadent and egoistic. He is also disloyal to his nation and has nothing but contempt for both the government and the common people. Not only does As‘ad Bēh plan to sell a factory to a rich businessman from the Gulf for personal profit, he also cares nothing for the government. As‘ad Bēh clearly expresses this contempt. He calls al-Mansī’s (‘Ādil Imām) signal box a rubbish bin, and when al-Mansī reminds him that the signal box is government property and that calling it a rubbish bin is an insult to the government, he explodes, shouting: “To hell with the government!”

Galāl Amīn (2000) writes that “the rich in *The Forgotten One* look upon the signal man with real hatred and fear.” He contrasts this with the old upper classes, as represented in the old films of Nagīb al-Rīḥānī. These old upper classes were confident and viewed social differentiation as a part of the natural order of things. They regarded the poor either with genuine sympathy or with complete indifference. The upper class in this film are no longer land-owners; their wealth is now from more dubious activities, ranging from brokering to pimping. Not only is the new upper class unproductive, their source of income is in itself unproductive and morally tarnished (Amīn, 2000, pp. 141-42). While, as we have seen, pre-infitāḥī patriotic capitalists like Ṭal‘at Ḥarb in *Playing with the Grownups* were part of the national story of progress – they allegedly ‘cared’ for the people and the nation – these new ‘unpatriotic’ and morally tarnished capitalists feel only contempt towards al-Mansī and call him and his likes gnats (*hāmūsh*) and worthless (*halāfīt*).

This class of ‘leaches’ is contrasted with al-Mansī (in *The Forgotten One*) and Ḥasan (in *Playing with the Grownups*), who embody Egypt and Egyptian values. In sharp contrast to As‘ad Bēh’s disloyalty, al-Mansī stands steadfast at his signal box – if he were to leave his post the trains would collide (as Egypt would collide if the honest elements failed to remain steadfastly at their posts) – and he only takes up the fight with As‘ad Bēh and his gang after having ensured that his boss, the Minister of Transport, to whom he is loyal, is not among those invited. His chivalry and courage in helping Ghāda and protecting her against As‘ad

Bēh's much stronger gang is contrasted with their pimping and the presence of homosexuals at the party. Thus these films draw up a dualism based on values. As'ad Bēh's disloyalty is contrasted with al-Mansī's loyalty and patriotism, his greed with al-Mansī's content and humbleness, his pimping with al-Mansī's traditional '*ibn balad*' male values.

Al-Mansī and Ḥasan Bahlūl are both young men who are firmly rooted in Egyptian lower-class identity. Both live in poor, popular areas (*al-ḥāra*) of Cairo and both embody male underclass '*ibn al-balad*' codes of honour. In that sense they are both clearly a continuation of 'Ādil Imām's 1980s underclass desperado character. In *Playing with the Grownups* Ḥasan Bahlūl's relationship with State Security and especially people's fear of them, enables him to win respect in the quarter he lives in. The owner of the local coffee shop where Ḥasan spends most of his days constantly asks him for the money he is due, but Ḥasan utilises his relationship with State Security to take revenge and harass him. Likewise, when his fiancée, after having quarrelled with him, comes driving into the quarter with a rich new man, he turns into an underclass bully defending his and his quarter's honour. He calmly sits with his water-pipe in the middle of the street with his feet on the front of the car, before climbing onto the Mercedes and dancing on the roof, with the neighbourhood standing around him clapping enthusiastically. He then pulls her new fiancé out of the car and makes him run, to his fiancée's delight and the neighbours' encouraging shouts. Also al-Mansī attains a similar role in *The Forgotten One*: like an underclass avenger, he forces his way into the villa where the wealthy have their party, pours petrol over the 'honoured' guest from the Gulf, and threatens to set him alight unless he is allowed to take Ghāda with him back to his signal box. He comes to revenge his and his class's honour and to save Ghāda, who sought his help, from the dishonour of As'ad Bēh's pimping.

In *The Forgotten One* these two worlds of contrasting values are allegorically separated by a waterway. On the one side is al-Mansī's signal box – the world of fantasy and dreams, of the deprived and forgotten, who only have their dreams left – while on the other side we find the villa of the multimillionaire businessman As'ad Bēh – the world of 'reality', of those who have, but don't dream. The first world is covered in darkness, while the second is lit up in a cold, artificial light. The waterway separates the worlds of two social classes and thus functions as an allegory for the social dualism that separates Egypt into these two classes: one rich, decadent, westernised and egoistic, the other poor and deprived, but firmly rooted in Egyptian tradition and identity. These two worlds are again allegorically connected by the railway line.¹⁹ As'ad Bēh, whose party and deal have been spoiled, comes

with his bullies along this railway line, seeking revenge. They raise their guns to shoot al-Mansī, who has saved Ghāda and sent her away with the morning train, but as dawn breaks and some fallahīn appear they are unable to commit the crime. Al-Mansī seeks refuge with the people – confirming that he is not only an individual but also represents all the forgotten ones – and the businessman has to depart with his mission unaccomplished.

But the railway line also symbolises all the lost chances: all the missed trains, or unrealised dreams. When Ghāda realises that al-Mansī is still unmarried, she asks him: “So you missed the train of (chance of) marriage?” and al-Mansī answers: “As if that was the only train I missed. I’ve missed all the world’s trains. [...] I lost the chance to play with the other children, even the train of youthful naughtiness passed by without even slowing down. And here I am now, working for the railway, and a lot of trains pass by every day without even noticing me.” The protagonists in both films are deprived, and in many ways humiliated. A central aspect of their deprivation is their inability to marry and become ‘complete men’ for financial reasons. But it is not the deprived and humiliated character that is new to ‘Ādil Imām. While their miserable situation and unrealised dreams had usually made his protagonists turn to all kinds of immoral survival strategies and indulge in the same corruption that was responsible for their humiliation, to achieve social ascent, in these two films they hold steadfastly to their morally superior position. Al-Mansī in *The Forgotten One* seems to accept his poverty, believing it to be his destiny. He is no opportunist, he doesn’t crave wealth, and, as he himself says, “I have never taken anything that I know is not rightfully mine”. Al-Mansī prefers to escape into his dreams and create his own world at his lonely signal box.²⁰ He dreams of marrying, of a place of his own to live, and of a meaningful job, and as Naẓmī (1993) writes: “It is as if he dreams on behalf of all the forgotten ones whose existence is on the margins of life”. He satiates his sexual frustrations by borrowing cover-girl magazines from the local newspaper seller to entertain himself on his long nightshift. He visits the Cairo Film Festival to watch nude scenes²¹, and in his dreams he marries whoever he wants.

But that al-Mansī seems content with, and has accepted his own miserable situation does not mean that he is not sarcastic. Naẓmī (1993) comments that the censors in this film have provided ‘Ādil Imām with space to criticise the regime. When al-Mansī tells Ghāda about his dreams; how every night (in his dreams) he marries the girl he wants, how he has worked in countless professions and how he has even been president, he climbs the stairs of his signal box and, as if speaking to the audience, holds a parody of a presidential speech.

When he stops, not knowing what to say and having started with ‘Verily we’ (*innana*) four times, an imaginary listener asks: “Verily we what, Mr. President?”, upon which ‘Ādil Imām orders his imaginary guards, “Take that guy away and put him in shit (*zift*)!”²² But still, although al-Mansī is sarcastic and these scenes were perceived as bold, he remains loyal and does not question or confront any system. When, in order to defend his honour, he does confront, he is not confronting the system but a deviation from it. He is thus upholding the values on which the system is based.

In *Playing with the Grownups* Ḥasan Bahlūl has a more ambivalent character. He is not only sarcastic but has also retained some of the *fahlawa* of the previous subversive ‘Ādil Imām-character. He refuses to become a toy in the government’s hands, insisting that he is the people’s eye and not that of the government. He utilises his *fahlawa* to play his own game. His relationship with State Security, and his game of concealing his source of information from them, provides plenty of opportunities not only to expose the State Security’s ways but also to make fun of this much-feared institution. When Ḥasan is taken into its premises and led through its corridors, we can hear prisoners being beaten in the neighbouring rooms. But Ḥasan exploits his newly won importance. When he is tired, he lets them carry him to the VIP room; and when Muṭaṣīm al-Alfī brings in Bahlūl’s fiancée, and leaves the two alone in the office in the hope that he will confess to her, so that he can listen to them from the next room beside, his plan fails as it turns out that rather than confess they use the chance of finally being alone to make love. “Ḥasan! Have you forgotten where we are?”, his fiancée exclaims, upon which Ḥasan explains: “We are at the most secure place in the country. We are at State Security.” The premises of this feared institution are thus turned into their love nest. The poor citizen, rather than being exploited by the State Security, as would have happened in real life, uses them for his own ends.

Although Egyptian critics in general praised the film for its patriotism, many of them didn’t appreciate these ‘vulgar’ scenes²³ of what I would call ‘underclass empowerment’ or dream fulfilment, both in relation to the ‘new rich’ and the State Security: two groups that are perceived as being able to cause the common man trouble. I would claim that these scenes, rather than just being an unnecessary remnant of ‘Ādil Imām’s *fahlawa*, as some critics claimed, are an important element of the film’s popular aspect. Social roles are turned upside down and ‘Ādil Imām, the poor but honest underclass Egyptian with whom the audience identifies, not only has the upper hand for a moment but

also gets away with it. The film thus gives the audience the impression that ‘Ādil Imām is indeed ‘their man’.

‘Ādil Imām (cited from Maḥmūd Sa’d, 1991) claims that *Playing with the Grownups* “is a call for people to resist”. Egypt is in danger. I would suggest that the films can be read as a call to re-conquer the ‘dream of Egypt’: the dream of progress towards modernity, harmony and social justice. This dream has been lost sight of, or, as Ḥasan complains to the Sphinx, stolen. Both films draw up a Manichean dualism between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ in which Ḥasan Bahlūl and al-Mansī embody the ‘good’: people, government and nation. Ḥasan Bahlūl or Mu’taṣim al-Alfī, ‘Alī al-Zahhār and even al-Asyūṭī (Muṣṭafā Mutawallī), an officer who tried to make Ḥasan reveal his source by traditional means of torture, are, according to scriptwriter Waḥīd Ḥāmid, “me and you. They are real: people who reject and resist corruption, but each in his own way. Egyptians can keep silent and endure, but they will never give in” (cited from Sa’d, 1991). *The Forgotten One* completes this picture, clarifying the identity of ‘evil’. In both films ‘evil’ is the same: corruption embodied in ‘evil capitalists’. Even though both of these films are ‘confrontational’, fighting governmental corruption, and both contain sarcastic comments on state and power, as seen in al-Mansī’s parody of a presidential speech in *The Forgotten One* and the mocking of the practices of the State Security in *Playing with the Grownups*, they hardly represent an ‘attack on the system’. It is not the system that is corrupt, but it is infiltrated or maybe even dominated by evil and corrupt individuals. The discourse is one of morals, calling for a patriotic alliance of morality to cleanse Egypt of this corruption.

Social chaos / Social harmony

According to Armbrust (1998, p. 283) *Terrorism and Barbecue* was a film that caught everyone’s attention. It was praised by the critics. The public flocked to see it and the film was even noticed in the west. The film was seen as being bold. It seemingly criticised both the state and its Islamist opponents, and as Armbrust (ibid, p. 284) points out, it was selected for exhibition in the west on the assumption that it transcended the usual generic conventions of Egyptian cinema: i.e. that it said something that could not be said before. In Egypt too, the film was perceived as bold. Naẓmī (1992) salutes the censorship, claiming that the fact that they licensed this film shows that our censors are enlightened. Ḥusn Shāh (1992) also praises the censors, declaring that such a film would not have been permitted

previously. And in the state newspaper *al-Jumhūriyya* we read that “the film again confirms that we are living in an extraordinary atmosphere of freedom and democracy” (N. N., 1992).

I would agree with Armbrust when he suggests that the film “in fact did not convey any bold new social and political criticism, but rather a bold neo-conservatism that attempts to recoup notions of modernity and national community that had fallen out of favour” (Armbrust 1998, p. 284); and I would claim that both this and the following film, *Sleeping in Honey*, remain firmly within the accepted limits of criticism. Moreover, I would claim that even though *Terrorism and Barbecue* and *Sleeping in Honey* differ from the other two in several ways – unlike *Playing with the Grownups* and *The Forgotten One*, which were discussed in the previous section, the two films in question here don’t draw up the same Manichean dualism between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ – the discourse of morality and patriotism in these films is very similar to that of the two previous ones.

A certain realist-reformist paradigm has dominated Egyptian fiction since the beginning of the 20th century – since Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī’s *Ḥadīth ʿĪsā Ibn Hishām*. In his introduction to the 1907 edition al-Muwayliḥī wrote that he was “exposing the manners and customs” of his contemporaries, describing the vices that should be avoided and the virtues that should be respected (Jacquemond, 2004, p. 45). I would claim that this is not very unlike what ʿĀdil Imām is doing in these films. And as with al-Muwayliḥī, the ‘exposing of the manners and customs’, or the description of reality, is closely linked to morality in the way that ʿĀdil Imām in these films, through his recent transformation to the unambiguous good hero, embodies the virtues exposing vices and malfunctions.

Moreover, the government has a long-established tradition of allowing a measure of political dissidence or sarcastic commentary, and as long as it stays within the limits of the above-mentioned ‘realist-reformist paradigm’, it is not only accepted but probably also encouraged. The comic criticism of government policies as seen in *Terrorism and Barbecue* and *Sleeping in Honey*, the two films that will be discussed in this section, not only ‘lets off steam’, helps the regime to retain a respectable democratic façade (as the above-mentioned critics who praised the censorship would indicate) and re-bolsters its modernist image, but politics as a kind of ‘safe topic’ also allows for the avoidance of more dangerous issues, as, for example, freedom of faith, rigid value systems and sexual orientation. “To ‘let off steam’ against the government is thus much easier than challenging rigid value systems and showing aspects of society that neither the audience nor the censors would like to see” (Sarah Enany, n. d., p. 64).

In *Terrorism and Barbeque* ‘Ādil Imām is the ordinary loyal middle class citizen Aḥmad Faṭḥ al-Bāb.²⁴ His loyalty is above question. As he says himself: “All my life I have done what the government tells me to do: this one, the one before and the one before that again, and also the coming one I will do what it tells me to do.” The vices and malfunctions are exposed through him going to the *Mugamma*²⁵ for the supposedly simple task of obtaining a permit to move his son from a school far away to one closer to home, a task that proves a veritable ‘mission impossible’. The claustrophobic congestion of the *Mugamma* – clearly an allegory for Cairo’s overpopulation – is only the first obstacle. Aḥmad has to squeeze himself into a lift and is hardly able to breathe. On the seventh floor he is swept along by the crowd until he is finally able to squeeze himself clear and stumbles into the office he wants. Except for two employees, a woman constantly speaking into the phone giving her maid orders about how to cook, and a man totally absorbed in prayer, the office is empty. When Aḥmad, having given up on the woman, is at last able to get through to the male clerk by interrupting him between two prayers, he is rudely informed that the clerk he needs is away for a week on a training course (*dawra tadribiyya*), and that he must come back again after a week. Back at the *Mugamma* the week after, the needed clerk is still away – this time he is not on a training course (*dawra tadribiyya*) but on the toilet (*dawrat al-miyāh*)! But, as he is told, the clerk, whose name is Midḥat, is a refined person who therefore doesn’t use the toilets in the *Mugamma*, which are far too dirty. Aḥmad thus has to search for Midḥat at the toilets of the neighbouring high-class institutions - the Ramses Hilton Hotel, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and The Arab League, in all three of which he is thrown out and humiliated.

In 1991, the year preceding the film, Egypt had signed a Structural Adjustment Program with the World Bank and the IMF to speed up the privatisation policies that had started during the *infitāḥ* period. The welfare state and bureaucracy were scaled down at an ever-increasing speed. The exposure and criticism of the inefficiency of the oversized state bureaucracy of the *Mugamma* therefore fit perfectly into the regime’s agenda of economic reform and modernisation. But this liberalisation had naturally produced its own set of winners and losers. The civil servant (*muwazzaf*), the epitome of Egyptian modernity, was becoming increasingly marginalised, and many Egyptians have since the early 1970s come to feel that their economy has been in a state of depression and that society in general has been on a downward spiral.

On the bus, on his way to the *Mugamma'*, an old man sitting next to Aḥmad is reading a newspaper. Aḥmad asks the man whether there is any news of anything becoming cheaper. Everything has grown so expensive. The old man responds: "A lot of things will be cheaper and their prices will be dirt cheap: me, you and that gentleman over there and all of you." At home Aḥmad, who represents this class of marginalised civil servants, is hardly able to provide for his family's basic needs. To make ends meet he has to work at two jobs: in the daytime he works for the government and in the evening in a *shawarma* shop. In the early 1990s government salaries had sunk so low that they barely sufficed to keep a family above the poverty line, and by then the taking of an additional job to supplement one's income had become the very symbol of a marginalised Egyptian middle class. This is definitely no longer 'a country for the holders of certificates', – as Disūqī Affandī had complained in the early 1960s. In Egypt in the 1990s Aḥmad, the loyal middle-class citizen, is humiliated in every aspect of life. Late at night, when he is carrying home two pounds' worth of state-subsidised bread, two girls sneer at him: "Look at that guy with the loaves." Exhausted after long a day's work, he comes home late Thursday night with a bottle of beer to celebrate the weekend. But his wife, who is just as exhausted as he is, has already fallen asleep and shut the world out with a pile of blankets. He sings 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ songs, in an endeavour to wake her up by evoking 'the good old days', but to no avail. When she finally wakes, she is not in the mood. The beer bottle explodes, she screams something about just having washed the floor, and the children wake up.

Aḥmad's bottle of beer is only one of several signs in the film that can be interpreted as indicating that the pressure on the Egyptian citizen has become intolerable, and that this could explode into social chaos. How much more can the Egyptian citizen endure? Is he never going to explode? When the afore-mentioned old man tries to squeeze himself out of the overcrowded bus, he yells at the passengers to let him through, telling them that they, and especially the women, should stand sidewise and not crosswise on the bus. The passengers all burst out laughing at this sexual comment – women should have their bums against the wall in order to avoid sexual harassment – upon which the old man angry turns around yelling: "My God! You enjoyed that silly joke! I know, but when it's something serious you pout your lips! May a calamity befall you, you and your generation! (*gatku l-bala fīku wi fi ayyamku*). Soft-drink bottles lined up in their crate are better off than you. Still, if someone puts pressure on them, they explode" – just like Aḥmad's bottle of beer. "That's because they are filled with gas," one of the passengers comments. "And what

are you gentlemen filled with?” the old man goes on. “Curdled milk or cottage cheese? Cowards! You, whose voices are only heard [when you talk about] trivialities (*fi l-fargha*). Just stay like that! Raise your children, enjoy yourself Thursday night, perform your ritual ablutions Friday morning and go and pray. To stand behind the *imām* invoking God’s blessings is all you are good for!” As in *Playing with the Grownups*, in which Ḥasan interconnects all phones in Cairo to make them ring simultaneously and exhort Egyptians to wake up and pay attention to the fact that Egypt is in danger, *Terrorism and Barbecue* similarly calls people to wake up from their slumber. The film gives the impression that the Egyptian citizen of the 1990s is in a ‘coma’, accepting everything that is done to him. But Aḥmad, the Egyptian middle-class citizen, is not ‘filled with cottage cheese’, and back at the *Mugamma*’ for a third time he can bear no more. He explodes, loses his temper and starts a fight with the religious clerk. Security is called in, and in the turmoil that follows he suddenly finds himself with a gun in his hand and a handful of scared hostages. Everybody else, including the guards, run for their lives.

The same predicament of the increasingly marginalised and powerless middle-class clerk that in *Terrorism and Barbecue* explodes into the seizure of the *Mugamma*’ – the very symbol of the malfunction and inefficiency of the system – is in *Sleeping in Honey* allegorised as a general state of impotence. Shohat and Stam (1994, p. 272) single out ‘allegories of impotence’ as one of the types of exaggerated national allegories commonly expressed by formerly colonised nations, where the allegory expresses the social, political and economic predicaments of Third World nations.

In *Sleeping in Honey*²⁶ ‘Ādil Imām is the chief of police investigation in Cairo, Magdī Nūr. He has to deal with an epidemic of mass impotence spreading from central areas throughout the city.²⁷ The narrative of the film is driven forward through impotence as a form of cultural shame – it is there but nobody dares to speak about it. No one is willing to admit the calamity, not to mention address the matter. Magdī Nūr’s boss just laughs at him, saying: “We are a people with shame. To speak about these things is shameful.” The refusal to deal with the calamity also turns *Sleeping in Honey* into a comment on ‘Egypt’s reputation’ – the catchword that has become an excuse for covering up and refusing to deal with all kinds of embarrassing issues, and which has often been used as an argument to censor cultural products that present Egypt in an unfavourable light. In one scene a bored and impotent man sitting together with a group of prostitutes in a bar declares that “respect is the most important thing’ and now “there is nothing left but respectability”. As everybody

is by now impotent and illicit acts are no longer possible, the whole country has become 'respectable'. The film thus subverts the argument of 'respectability' and 'Egypt's reputation', transforming it into an argument in which ignorance and the refusal to expose the real state of things is what threatens 'Egypt's reputation'.

Exactly what the impotence in *Sleeping in Honey* allegorises is made clear by several pieces of dialogue. "People are enduring a lot. Their burden has become very heavy", Magdī Nūr's driver tells him. Although the film does not mention the dismantling of the welfare state directly, it does so implicitly. "Sex," Magdī Nūr explains, "is something for free. People do it and are happy and they go to bed satisfied. If it is taken away from them [several other pleasures have already been taken away] they will not keep silent." But the film makes additional statements. Consulted by Magdī Nūr, the doctor Aḥmad al-Ayyūbī explains: "Television programs sometimes result in frustration, reading newspapers causes frustration, constantly listening to lies and misinformation engenders frustration, and fear for the future can paralyse the whole body." The mass impotence is thus not only a result of hardship and overcrowdedness – the economic and social predicament – but also of the manipulation of people's will by the political establishment, and maybe even of the lack of openness and, as Kamran Asdar Ali (2003) claims, democracy – the political predicament.

In the streets of Cairo, people are getting more and more desperate as a result of this governmental neglect. Mosques and churches are full, drugs prices are quadrupling and anything is being sold as a cure for desperate people. People are resorting to illusions, witchcraft and charlatanism, and, as in *Terrorism and Barbecue*, social chaos threatens. According to Salmā 'Aṣfūr, the female journalist who assists Magdī Nūr in researching the case, people blame the government. "They say that it has brought in a gas with neither colour nor smell. Once you breathe in the gas, you are afflicted. People claim the government does this to reduce population growth." A reduction of the population was often presented as a solution to reduce development expenditures, thus putting less pressure on the state to provide for education, health care and jobs (Ali, 2003). But, as Magdī Nūr comments: "I don't think any government would do something like that to its people." While the film thus comments on the deteriorating state of the Egyptian citizen in a period of IMF-guided structural adjustment, the film clearly acquits the government of this conspiracy. This does not mean, however, that the film doesn't discuss the government's role. Magdī Nūr claims that "The citizens' wellbeing is a public responsibility." The film thus

calls on the government to assume responsibility for its citizens. When Magdī Nūr speaks in parliament, this call is clearly stated:

“In this honoured assembly you discuss all kind of matters [...] but you don’t discuss the citizens’ situation (*aḥwāl al-muwāṭin*).

[...] If the people have lost hope, we should give them hope [music], hope on which they can live.

If the people have forgotten how to sing, we should play for them so that they can sing again.

I imagine that these things can bring us back to our natural state again, instead of being governed by fables and superstition and being a people driven around like mules (*sha‘b shīī āāāāā*).”

To me it seems that ‘Ādil Imām here takes upon himself a role analogous to that of the ‘official’ opposition parties: on the one hand he points out malfunctions, shortcomings and deviations in government policy while on the other upholding and reinforcing the discourse of national identity.

So what, according to the film, is the solution for Egypt’s predicament, or the nation’s impotence? Magdī Nūr finds his own private solution. To escape from the overcrowdedness and pollution, he goes out into the desert. There, under the naked sky, he manages to make love with his wife and overcome his impotence. “Going out into the desert has recently become a preferred solution to many intractable problems. It has been the prescription for problems such as over-population and unemployment of the government’s, or more accurately, of the official media” (Reem Saad, 1999, p. 27). But Magdī Nūr comments that “not everybody can leave and go into the desert”. The scene could therefore be a reflection of the easy solutions being prescribed by the establishment.

“So what is to be done?” Magdī Nūr asks the same doctor. “What is to be done? *al-‘ilm!*” (knowledge or science) the doctor answers. Knowledge or science is the solution. In a typically modernist way knowledge (*‘ilm*), the factor that will bring progress, is here through Magdī Nūr – the name itself (Magdī means ‘glorious’, while Nūr means ‘light’) implies that he is a representative of enlightenment – assisted by the doctor, presented in contrast to ignorance (*jahl*), which the desperate, ignorant people being ignored by their government are resorting to. Knowledge (*‘ilm*), as opposed to ignorance (*jahl*), is connected with *nūr* (light) as opposed to darkness. The editor of Salmā’s paper asks himself whether we should illuminate (*ninawwar*) the case: i.e. uncover and publish, or darken it (*ni‘attimha*):

i.e. cover it up; tell the truth or lie. After this theme has been presented, the Minister of Health becomes the voice of ignorance, darkness and lying contrasted with Magdī Nūr, who represents knowledge, (en)light(enment) and truth. The Minister manages to convince Parliament that the whole story of mass impotence is only an evil rumour set out to weaken the nation, and they vote to close this embarrassing case. The Minister covering up the case then appears on television, and in a parody of the stupid and ignorant minister he claims that all you have to do is to stand in front of the mirror and tell yourself that you are strong and that everything is fine.

Magdī, the representative of enlightenment, resigns from his position in protest against the state's or the modernising institutions' failure to reach out their hands to 'the common man' and release him from his predicament. He returns to the people in the streets and asserts he has the cure: "If you want to be healed, follow me!" Storming out of mosques and churches, leaving their ignorant preachers perplexed, the people follow their hero, who leads them towards Parliament, shouting "āh" – an exclamation of pain and distress. In front of Parliament they are met by the riot police, led by Magdī's former superiors, who order him: "Magdī! Your place is not there!", to which he responds: "I am in the right place, together with the people: a people who for years haven't expressed their pain." The state's right place is with the people and not opposed to them. He walks towards the perplexed MPs who have come out to see what's afoot and proceeds to address them: "Honoured MPs. Here you have the people. Deal with them as best you can." Magdī has handed the people over to their proper representatives in an orderly manner. He has thus restored unity and bridged the gap between people and government.

Terrorism and Barbecue also ends on a similar note of social harmony. Much as in *Sleeping in Honey*, the film first exposed the bureaucratic inefficiency and intolerable conditions that the ordinary Egyptian has to endure, showing how these flaws in society threaten to explode into social chaos, before it moves on towards reconciliation. Together with the hostages; the civil servants of the *Mugamma'*, including the 'fundamentalist' clerk, who, through the events, come to sympathise with 'the terrorist', form 'a community' of humiliated citizens who hold off the might of the government until morning. But as the government decides to storm the *Mugamma'*, and with no hope of a favourable solution, Aḥmad, who is no evil 'terrorist' but a goodhearted citizen who does not want to harm anyone, decides to let his hostages go. Reluctantly they start to leave, but suddenly one of them commands them to stop. The hostages have come to like Aḥmad, and they take him

with them. He is one of them and together they march out of the *Mugamma'*. Outside, Aḥmad is asked by a journalist if he had seen the terrorist and what he looked like. Aḥmad explains that “he was neither tall, nor short, I mean he was neither very tall nor very short, he was neither very fat nor very thin, neither black nor white. Just like us, kind of,” and when the security forces storm the building, they find no terrorists. The next morning it is business as usual, as if nothing has happened. The film thus ends with everybody friends, even the Islamist walking out side-by-side with the secularist ‘Ādil Imām. All the characters end up in their proper places. Society looks workable if everybody tries just a little harder and does his duty to the full without neglect.

In the course of the night ‘Ādil Imām has transformed the people into ‘useful citizens’. Initially, Aḥmad, who has become a ‘terrorist’ by accident, and his new-found allies are unable to formulate any demands that can be translated into collective action. “So what about some *kabāb* and *kufta*?” Aḥmad suggests to the hostages, a suggestion which is received with an enthusiastic “*allāhu akbar!*” When the government wishes to negotiate and proposes “three pieces of Kentucky Fried for each” (i.e. a meagre IMF diet), they rise in a demonstration inside the *Mugamma'*, shouting “We want meat! If not we’ll make life hell for you!” For a short while ‘Ādil Imām puts the government at the people’s service and has waitresses from the nearby Cairo Semiramis serve them five-star *kabāb* by. ‘Ādil Imām wins the people’s hearts, and they in turn gather around their popular hero, who becomes their mouthpiece. In a long monologue he puts their grievances into words. “Every day I go to work crammed [in a bus] and I return in it just as crammed. I am happy when I ride the bus.” He then looks up at the fundamentalist clerk and says sarcastically: “Praise the Lord who hath put this [i.e. the over-crammed bus] at our disposal,” before continuing: “Prices are on fire [i.e. skyrocketing] (*il-as’ār nār*)... But so what? The whole world is on fire. I don’t have a lot of children. I observe my family planning as the government tells me to. I have only one son and one daughter, and thank God they are fine and doing well at school. Yes, it’s true that their class has eighty-four students and that they come home worn out, dizzy and with their faces sallow from overcrowding and air pollution in the classroom. But, thank God, they are okay. Nothing troubles me but the task of obtaining bread (*mafīsh ḥāga ta’bāni ghēr ghirīf il-‘ēsh*). I have to stand in a long queue, suffering to find it, and I suffer when I eat it. I am just like you: trying to stay out of trouble (*māshi gamb il-ḥēt*), content and humble” and reformulates their demands: “I’m only demanding my humanity. I don’t want to be humiliated. I don’t want to be humiliated at home, at work or in the street.”

I would contend that in these four films 'Ādil Imām and the filmmakers have taken upon themselves a kind of consciousness-raising project. The 'people' have to shake off their apathy, let their voice be heard and so contribute 'positively' to society. In *Sleeping in Honey* the 'people' are led towards Parliament to voice their grievances in an orderly demonstration, thus avoiding the threat of disorder and chaos. I would therefore agree with Ali (2003), who claims that the film could be read as a contribution towards constructing a responsible citizenry of self-disciplined subjects who respond to their social problems through 'proper' political channels. People are first made aware of the fact that Egypt is in danger and then that everybody is obliged to take responsibility. *Playing with the Grownups* and *The Forgotten One* exposed the selfishness of the 'evil capitalist' who profited at the expense of the nation. The films drew up a dichotomy based on values foregrounding virtues like unselfish patriotism and traditional Egyptian values, as opposed to the vices of selfishness and decadence. What *Terrorism and Barbecue* and *Sleeping in Honey* do is similar, but here it is not a selfish and decadent 'other' who is confronted, rather the films seem to blame vices such as ignorance and laziness, and call on everyone to stand steadfastly by his duty. Like al-Mansī, who stood steadfastly at his signal box so that the trains would not collide, society and the system would have worked and the *Mugamma'* not been seized had it not been for the widespread neglect. The outlook in these films is therefore moralistic and patriotic and it put the blame on individuals and not the system itself. If everybody did what is in the nation's interest, if both the people and those in government observed their patriotic responsibility, society would be harmonious and order would be maintained or re-established.

The Minister of the Interior (Kamāl al-Shinnāwī), who is in charge and has to resolve the hostage situation, is, in fact, just as frustrated as the rest of the citizens over the widespread negligence and malfunctioning. When he first hears about the seizure of the *Mugamma'* by terrorists, he complains: "Is it impossible to get even half an hour's rest? Never any good news? Only catastrophes, fires, armed robberies and terrorism. Other ministers lie back in their offices and listen to music, and they appear on television more often than pop stars," and when the 'terrorists' demand a packet of medicine (one of the hostages, a poor old woman can't afford this expensive medicine), he exclaims that "medicine is the responsibility of the Minister of Health! It seems we are destined to take responsibility for the shortcomings of the other ministries."

In a scene in which the Minister of the Interior is taking part in prayer at the Makram 'Ubayd Mosque opposite the *Mugamma'*, the sheikh ends the prayer with the standard, but in this context ambiguous, supplication: "May God save us from what the idiots (*al-sufahā'*) amongst us did." "Who do you think he means by 'idiots'," the minister asks his assistant. The way the sheikh fixes his eyes on the minister's would indicate that 'the idiots' are the government, but the minister's assistant assures him that it must be 'the terrorists'. Perplexed, and not really convinced, the minister accepts that it must be the terrorists that were meant. In fact both Aḥmad, the Egyptian citizen turned terrorist, and the minister himself are victims of what 'the idiots amongst us' did, which here again means all those individuals who, either because of egoism (as in *Playing with the Grownups* and *The Forgotten One*) or out of irresponsibility, laziness and ignorance (as in this film and *Sleeping in Honey*) fail to do their duty and so hamper Egypt's development. Corruption and neglect have brought about the crisis that led to the seizure of the *Mugamma'* and a 'clash' between people and government, both of whom are victims.

These films again are therefore no real 'attack on the system'. The system would be workable if everybody would just do his job properly. The discourse is as in the two previous ones, again moralist, attacking those who don't do their duty. These individuals are again to be found both amongst the people (the clerks in the *Mugamma'*) and, as the minister complains, in the government. The Islamic Fundamentalists get their share of blame. They are turning the priorities upside down. Not only does the religious clerk in the *Mugamma'* pray instead of work, but when he starts to complain about his situation as a hostage, Aḥmad or 'Ādil Imam blames him directly: "You shut up! It is you who are the reason for all this!" But exaggerated religious practice also prevents the minister doing his duty. When the minister takes up position on the minaret of the Makram 'Ubayd Mosque facing the *Mugamma'* to get an overview of the situation, the call comes for prayer. Naturally the minister doesn't find this the right time to go down to pray (*wa huwwa da wa'tu!*), but he has no choice, because as his assistant advises him: "What would people say if they knew that the minister was standing on the minaret when the call for prayer came and refused to go down to pray?"

'Ādil Imām might be boldly testing the bounds in these films by, for example, using the presence – at that time unrecorded – of the Minister of the Interior as one of the main characters in *Terrorism and Barbecue*, the government lying in the media, both in *Playing with the Grownups* and *Terrorism and Barbecue*, and the simple Egyptian who dreams of being

president in *The Forgotten One*, would indicate, and this was probably the reason why these films were perceived as being so bold. On the other hand they all remain firmly within the 'traditional mode of intervention' described by Jacquemond. They point a finger at all that is wrong – corruption, administrative malfunctioning, apathy and repression – and call for a change. In that way their cause is not rebellion, but reformist and conservative. The 'change' is a 'change back', to bring Egypt back to the right path towards modernity. Egypt is in danger. It has deviated from the right track and the films point out corruption and negligence as the dangers. These again are caused by individuals' selfishness and ignorance. The selfishness of the evil capitalists is confronted by patriotism and loyalty, while the ignorance of individuals, both amongst the people and in government, is confronted by a rhetoric of knowledge, speaking out, and enlightenment, and although the films claim to speak on behalf of, and let the audiences identify with, the common citizens' predicament, the focus here is one of duty more than of rights. None of these four films are any longer what Armbrust described as 'centrifugal'. They all project a picture of a threatened, yet possible, social harmony. Through reproducing social values and calling for solidarity and responsibility these films may aim at coercing people into loyalty.

Conclusion

It may seem that films of this kind, projecting social harmony and calling for duty and solidarity, again gained relevance in the early 1990s, and that they very much represent the mood of the time. Armbrust (1998) suggests that increased violence, crime and social chaos, in addition to a widespread fear prevalent at the time that the political violence and culture war between the regime and its Islamist opponents might spin out of control and lead to a civil war, probably again made such cinematic visions of social unity relevant. The first half of the 1990s was the highpoint of the Islamist terror campaign that was threatening to tear society apart. Even though these films can be linked only indirectly to the opposition to Islamist terrorism, it seems that modernism and patriotism have re-emerged in these films as the imagined glue that holds society together against this threat.

These films are very much an expression of the regime taking control. The regime realised that "it could no longer entrust the ideological struggle with the Islamist opposition to institutional Islam alone" (Jacquemond, 2008, p. 26). "In its efforts to constrain the Islamists, the Egyptian state attempted to reconstruct a 'modern' image for

itself by enlisting the secular players in the cultural field” (Samia Mehrez, 2001, p. 10). It can therefore seem that the state in the early 1990s made a conscious decision to not only ‘dominate’ politically through coercion, but that it from now on also attempted to regain intellectual and moral hegemony. The regime thus reached out a hand to the leftist intelligentsia. Ideologically in a vacuum after the collapse of the communist bloc and the second Gulf War, and embattled by the growing interference by men of religion, this intelligentsia accepted the alliance. Thus Minister of Culture Fārūq Ḥusnī enlisted the country’s major cultural players under the banner of enlightenment (ibid, p. 13) – ‘enlightenment’ (*al-tanwīr*) was re-launched to combat ‘darkness’ (*al-ẓalām*) – and it seems quite probable that ‘Ādil Imām was one of these ‘cultural players’. With his huge popularity and with his audience the same as that from which the Islamists recruit, i.e. the lower urban middle classes, ‘Ādil Imām was a valuable asset for the regime in its confrontation with the Islamists. It therefore seems clear that modernism and nationalism ‘returned’ to Egyptian cinema, and especially in the films of ‘Ādil Imām, simultaneously with, and as a response to, the regime losing patience with the Islamic opposition. Augustus Richard Norton (2005, cited from Kandil, 2008, p. 8) considers the parliamentary elections of 1990 the beginning of the end of Mubārak’s tolerance with Islamism. It is therefore not unlikely that the regime, after a lengthy period of co-opting the Islamist opposition, would accompany its sudden sledgehammer attempt to suppress it with a strategic use of nationalism and that these films were a part of this campaign.

Fundamentalism as the enemy

Having established the re-emergence of patriotism, social unity and modernism in the films of ‘Ādil Imām, and pointed out the likelihood of this ‘return’ being related to the ‘Islamist threat’, in this chapter I will take a closer look at how this threat is being dealt with in ‘Ādil Imām’s films, and how this is related to the regime’s own policy on the issue. I will attempt to extract the anti-Islamist rhetoric present in these films and show how patriotism and modernism – on the one side enlightenment and on the other sound traditional values – are the main elements of the discourse. The following analysis will primarily concentrate on *The Terrorist* (1994) and *Birds of Darkness* (1995), ‘Ādil Imām’s principal anti-Islamist films, but I will also bring in elements from other of his films, in addition to his real-life appearances. In the second part of this chapter I will make a detour to the discourse of ‘national unity’,

which from its very beginning has been a central aspect of secular Egyptian nationalism. This discourse is heavily present in *The Terrorist* and is the main theme in *Hassan and Murqus* (2008). I will conclude the chapter with some remarks on how this patriotic anti-Islamist discourse relates to the government's own domestic strategy alternating between appropriation and exclusion and how the films' discourse is related structurally to the Islamists' own discourse.

The 'new morality' of the early 1980s and Saudi financial influence on cinematic distribution had caused the industry, including 'Ādil Imām, problems with the censors. Moreover, the Islamic trend, in its quest for morality and the Islamisation of society, had developed a discourse against the entertainment industry in general and particularly the performance of women. Shaykh Muḥammad al-Ghazālī, for example, used to cite the arts in the same breath as atheism and prostitution; and the influential TV-preacher Shaykh Mutawallī al-Sha'rāwī was negative to female artists, for "they incite sexual instincts" (Tadros, 1994, pp. 28-30, cited from Shafik, 2001, p. 716). The regulation of public morality emerged as an area of convergence among various Islamist groups (Salwa Ismail, 2003, p. 59). Several female performers responded to the pressure; they donned the veil, retreated and denounced the whole industry as sinful. The controversy surrounding the veiling of female stars in the 1980s was accompanied by attacks on, and the burning of, cinemas and video shops and the defacing of cinema posters. This, combined with direct threats against cinema stars, led to a general feeling of embattlement and fear. The climate of confrontation reached its climax in the first half of the 1990s. It is therefore only natural that certain figures in the industry should have felt compelled to take a stand against this threat. The fact that the regime offered the leftist intelligentsia an 'alliance', as mentioned in the previous chapter, is therefore not to be taken to mean that certain 'cultural players', or the cinema industry, were simply being used by the regime in their fight against the Islamist threat; we may rather talk about congruent interests. Both 'Ādil Imām and the scriptwriter Waḥīd Ḥāmid have earned themselves a reputation for their anti-Islamist stand, and as for 'Ādil Imām this reputation precedes the above-mentioned alliance.

Asyūṭ appearance

In 1988, in the Upper Egyptian city of Asyūṭ, Islamist students had been rioting at university against the traditional music and theatre program at the end of the academic year, forcing

the program to be cancelled (van Nieuwkerk, 1996, p. 65). The incident was a perfect opportunity for ‘Ādil Imām to enter the stage and register his protest against the strangulation of art by the fundamentalists by staging his play *Sayyid the Servant* [*al-wād sayyid al-shaghghāl*] in Asyūṭ.

‘Ādil Imām had tried to arrange a cultural sponsorship for his and his theatre troupe’s visit, but when the officials at the University of Asyūṭ were reluctant (Raymond Baker, 1995, p. 23) – according to ‘Ādil Imām they were too scared (cited from Sarḥān, 2006) – he did not hesitate to contact the Minister of the Interior, Zakī Badr, who arranged a formal invitation from the Governor of Asyūṭ (Baker, 1995, p. 23). The city of Asyūṭ has a large Christian minority and relations between the two communities had deteriorated in the 1970s, with sectarian clashes erupting in the surrounding villages; and in 1981 the assassination of al-Sādāt coincided with an uprising in the province which was put down by the government. The setting in the City of Asyūṭ, with all the meaning it carries of confrontation with violent Islamic fundamentalism, was therefore a perfect site to stage such a national clarion call to resist the alleged strangulation of culture (ibid, p. 20). The regime was thus able to choreograph the confrontation in Asyūṭ as a spectacle with meaning for the entire nation (ibid). The cast of characters – vulnerable artists, protective security forces and violent radicals – made plausible the improbable assumption that the most serious threat to freedom came from extremists rather than from the state (ibid, p. 21). Absent from the scene were any forms of centrist Islamic alternative (ibid). It was a drama between good and evil. Background conditions such as the long neglect of Upper-Egypt, the dismal state of public services, the lack of infrastructure and the high unemployment rate in the area, a void into which the Islamists had stepped, were absent from the scene (ibid).

‘Ādil Imām himself reinforced the government reading by insisting that he didn’t intend to play a political role (ibid, p. 22). In a short speech he gave at a reception for him and his theatre troupe, held by the governor, Abd al-Ḥalīm Mūsā, he declared that he was not acting in opposition to any group but rather in order to stand up for his art, “For a country with no art, is one with no conscience” (*Rūz al-Yūsuf*, 06.06.1988, cited from Baker, 1995, p. 22; Sarḥān, 2006²⁸). Journalists and literary figures of the Left rallied behind the slogans, and the story was presented as an abstract metaphysical confrontation between good and evil: freedom versus mindless violence. The journal *Rūz al-Yūsuf* led this campaign, and reports were often cast in a very militaristic and confrontational language, as “When

‘Ādil Imām heard the clatter of the chains in Asyūṭ trying to strangle Art there, he travelled with his company of actors to perform his play in the heart of Asyūṭ ignoring the fire of the extremists” (Ṣabāḥ al-Khayr 19.03.1992, cited from Baker, 1995, p. 22).

Cinema confronting fundamentalism

But as a theme dealt with by cinema in Egypt, fundamentalism was slow to emerge. ‘Alī Abū Shādī (1998, p. 152) ascribes this to the fear and atmosphere of intimidation prevalent at the time. Already in the early 1980s ‘Ādil Imām had started to take on the Islamist trend. In 1983 he had forwarded a film script with the title *The Imām ‘Ādil* or *The Just Imām (al-Imām ‘Ādil)*. But the script, which was ‘Ādil Imām’s own idea, was never turned into a film; it was rejected by the censors on the ground that it mocked religious authorities (‘Abd Allāh, 1999). But although the fear of offending religious sensibilities that seems to have guided the censors prevented this issue moving to centre-stage, the occasional mocking of Islamists or oblique scenes that disapproved of incursions of religion into domains which the state designated as secular had, from the government’s point of view, long been unproblematic (Armbrust, 1998, p. 297).²⁹

Terror [al-Irhāb] (1989), directed by Nādir Galāl and starring Nādiyā al-Gindī, was the first film to take terrorism as its title. But although the script was about Islamist terrorists, the film did not yet dare to be so explicit. The ‘terrorists’ were turned into a simple gang of criminals without any specific identity (Abū Shādī, 1998, p. 137). ‘Ādil Imām’s *Terrorism and Barbecue* (1992) not only had the word ‘terrorism’ in its title, but also subtly blamed the fundamentalist character Rashād, who spends his day praying instead of working, for the malfunctioning of government services. Moreover, the film contrasts his pious appearance with his constantly staring at, and even trying to seduce, the call girl. But despite all these hesitant attempts, it was ‘Ādil Imām’s *The Terrorist* (1994) that was going to be Egyptian cinema’s first frontal attack on Islamic fundamentalism and the film was to set the standards for how this issue was going to be dealt with by cinema in the following years.

The Terrorist

Being the first of its kind, *The Terrorist* has to be read against the background of a change of policy which gave the film the regime’s explicit moral backing. In 1993 Ṣafwat al-Sharīf, the Minister of Information, announced a new policy of confronting terrorism with media (*al-*

idhā'a wa-l-tilifzyōn 03.04.1993, cited from Lila Abu Lughod, 2005, p. 175). The campaign included a television serial called *The Family* [*al-ʿĀʾila*³⁰] that was broadcast during Ramadan (February 12th to March 14th) 1994. After *The Family*, the program *Confession by a Repentant Terrorist*³¹ was broadcast (Armbrust, 2002a, p. 924), followed by the opening of the ʿĀdil Imām film *The Terrorist* during *ʿĪd al-Fiṭr*. Released to a blizzard of critical acclaim, *The Terrorist* was the crown jewel in the campaign (Armbrust, 2002a, p. 924). It is not unlikely that a film like *The Terrorist* would have experienced difficulties before this explicit change of policy. The screenplay for Waḥīd Ḥāmid’s television serial *The Family* had allegedly been held back by the censors for three years, for fear of offending fundamentalist sensibilities, but after the above-mentioned change of policy it was produced to a great fanfare (Abu Lughod, 2005, p. 167). This indicates that by 1993 the regime had moved some borders of the possible in relation to fundamentalism on screen.

It has been pointed out that this change of policy was less a response to terrorism than to non-violent, but threatening, political challenges posed by Islamists (Ahmed Abdalla, 1993). The regime, together with the secular opposition at the time, was losing ground to the Islamists in elections for both local councils and professional associations. Starting in 1992, the regime had again resorted to repressive measures against the non-violent Brotherhood, and in January 1993 Mubārak proclaimed at the Cairo International Book Fair that he intended to spare Egypt the fate of Algeria, capitalising support from the ‘opposition’ both from the right and the left, indiscriminately targeting all brands of Islamists, not only ‘terrorists’ (ibid).

A film released in coordination with a government campaign naturally leads to questions regarding not only the regime’s explicit support, but also in regard to direct government involvement. But there are also other indications. The film was shot under heavy police protection (ʿĀdil Imām, cited from Ṣabrī Ṣaqr, 2006). There are also rumours that ʿĀdil Imām and the director, Nādir Galāl, might have struck a deal with the government (Armbrust, 2002a, p. 927).³² An older ʿĀdil Imām film, *Gate Five* (1983), also directed by Nādir Galāl, which had been banned for its alleged smuttiness, was re-released the same *ʿĪd*. Of a total of 48 theatres, 18 were reserved for *The Terrorist* and 15 others for *Gate Five*, giving ʿĀdil Imām and Nādir Galāl a total domination over the cinemas that *ʿĪd*. The suspected deal here is, of course, that ʿĀdil Imām and Nādir Galāl got the dust of their banned film while the government got its anti-Islamist film: a deal that in itself recalls the congruent interests of the regime and the cultural players. There is also a lot of ambiguity around the funding of

the film. The credits list 'Pop Art Film', which is owned by the late Muṣṭafā Mutawallī, the character actor who plays Hānī, the Coptic neighbour in the film and who is also 'Ādil Imām's brother-in-law. This has led many to suspect that the film, which was a relatively big production at the time, was funded by 'Ādil Imām himself ³³ (ibid, p. 930: footnote 21).

But suspected government involvement in the film does not necessarily mean that the film team was not sincere in what they were doing, or that they were simply rendering the government some kind of service by making a straightforward propaganda film. 'Ādil Imām had at that time – as his 'visit' to Asyūṭ shows – already gained himself an anti-Islamist reputation. The film takes up the theme from Asyūṭ. 'Ādil Imām says that "When I returned from Asyūṭ, I wanted to convert my protest into a film" (cited from Sarḥān, 2006); and when he explains how the film came about, he applies the same kind of metaphysical rhetoric of destiny he did in Asyūṭ. 'Ādil Imām explains that his wife tried to convince him, for the sake of their children, not to make the film. It was only after an attempt on the life of the prime minister, 'Āṭif Ṣidqī, in December 1993 by al-Jihād al-Islāmī, when a young girl was killed by a stray bullet in class (in 'Ādil Imām's words, "while she was in the greatest of places receiving learning" (*wa-hiyya fi a'ḏam makān tatalaqqā al-'ilm*). Note the typical modernist discourse used by 'Ādil Imām here. He juxtaposes *'ilm* (knowledge) and *jahl* (ignorance), implying that those who kill a girl while she is imbibing 'knowledge' must be 'ignorant'), that she changed her mind, saying that "For the sake of our children, you must make that film" (ibid). The film placed 'Ādil Imām in the midst of confrontation again. Cinemas showing *The Terrorist* witnessed intense security measures (Sackur, 1994, cited from Khatib, 2006, p.184) and 'Ādil Imām was declared an enemy of Islam and received death threats (Faksh, 1997, cited from Khatib, 2006, p. 184).

The Terrorist is a conversion narrative (Armbrust, 2002b, p. 924) revolving around an injured militant Muslim fundamentalist, 'Alī 'Abd al-Ẓāhir ('Ādil Imām), hiding from the police. Circumstances enable him to hide in a sumptuous villa inhabited by a modern liberal bourgeois Muslim family, who do not know his true identity. In the course of the film the terrorist has a change of heart and is converted to secularist nationalism. He is eventually unmasked, and when his comrades set out to smuggle him to Afghanistan he tries to escape and return to his host family, so that he can explain himself and prove his conversion. But his erstwhile terrorist associates have been watching him, and the film ends with them murdering their repentant brother.

As a conversion narrative the film very much resembles the well-known nationalist film *There is a Man in our House* [*fī baytunā rajul*] (1961) by Henri Barakāt. The film, starring ‘Umar al-Sharīf, is to this very day shown on Egyptian state TV every 6th of October. In the 1961 film a nationalist fugitive who has killed an Egyptian collaborator converts his host family to the nationalist cause. While the scriptwriter, Līnīn al-Ramlī, denied any connection between the two films in an interview with Armbrust (2002a, p. 929: footnote 10), ‘Ādil Imām confirms the link. He claims that the film’s original title was *There is a Terrorist in our House* [*fī baytunā irhābī*] (cited from Munā al-Ḥasan, 2007). While the 1961 film argues that violence in the nationalist cause is necessary, *The Terrorist* paints violence in the Islamist cause as illegitimate (Armbrust, 2002a, p. 924). The ‘conversion’ of the terrorist during a football match between Egypt and Zimbabwe links the film to the nationalist cause. This conversion scene stands out as one of ‘Ādil Imām’s most famous. ‘Alī, the secular Muslim host family, their Christian neighbours and the anti-Islamist journalist are watching the World Cup qualification match between Egypt and Zimbabwe together.³⁴ ‘Alī sits next to Hānī, the Christian neighbour. ‘Alī now knows that he is Christian, and also Hānī is aware of ‘Alī’s fundamentalist views. They are therefore reluctant to greet each other, but their excitement over Egypt scoring the goal needed to enter the World Cup make them both forget their enmity and they instantly give each other a hug. The Christian crosses himself while the Muslim yells “*allāhu akbar*” – Egyptians (Muslims and Christians) are inseparably united through patriotism (Shafik, 2007, p. 51).

Birds of Darkness

A year later *The Terrorist* was followed up by *Birds of Darkness*. The film is about Islamist and secular lawyers fighting it out in the courts. At the time the courts had become a major battleground for competing ideologies. Islamist lawyers, supported by conservative ‘ulamā’, sought to enforce orthodoxy and public morality through filing so-called *ḥisba* lawsuits³⁵ and Cinema generally had become a main target for these lawsuits.³⁶

Whereas the football match in *The Terrorist* was the scene of national common ground and the conversion of the terrorist to Egyptian nationalism, the football becomes an allegory for the Egyptian nation itself in *Birds of Darkness*. Egypt is suffering from two equally evil and unscrupulous ‘teams’. Islamists and government are playing soccer and ‘Egypt’ is the ball.³⁷ Both of the two ‘teams’ are equally ‘birds of darkness’: opportunists who

conduct their illegal business in the dark, away from the public eye. Faṭḥī Nawfal (ʿĀdil Imām), the secular lawyer, represents corruption – the first team – while ʿAlī al-Zinātī (Riyāḍ al-Khulī), the Islamist lawyer represents fundamentalism or even terrorism – the second team. Fundamentalism and corruption: which of the two will succeed in destroying society? Faṭḥī and ʿAlī are old friends. They are both from poor backgrounds and graduated together. There is also a third friend, Muḥsin Sharīf (Aḥmad Rātīb), whose name would translate as ‘the honourable beneficent’. He still believes in the slogans of the past, but has chosen to retreat to passivity. The director, Sharīf ʿArafa, explains: "We were not just talking about the ‘opportunists’ of terrorism, there were government opportunists as well, and they are both equally dangerous. And both are terrorists. And the conflict between them will ruin the country. So be careful!" (cited from Ṭāriq ʿAṭiyya, 1999).

The title itself plays on the discourse of enlightenment (tanwīr). Darkness (ḡalām) is the opposite of light, and corruption, both in its fundamentalist and government form, is the ‘darkness’ threatening the nation and its progress. This ‘darkness’ has its ‘birds’: people who, either out of opportunism or moral weakness, lend themselves to these ‘forces of darkness’. Even though the film implies that the term ‘birds of darkness’ is directed at all who engage in illegal business, it is also rhetorically connected with fundamentalism, in the sense that the proponents of enlightenment see the fundamentalists as their opposite: they want to take us back to the ‘age of darkness’.³⁸ Moreover, although the film insists that both ‘teams’ are ‘birds of darkness’ and that Faṭḥī Nawfal – his name would roughly translate as ‘the gifted opener’ – is an opportunist, the film still invites the audience to identify with his predicament. One of the film’s most famous sentences is uttered by Faṭḥī Nawfal when, after having received his first large fee for defending a corrupt politician, he sees Cairo from above for the first time. Looking out the window from a suite at the Cairo Sheraton, he says: “To see this country from above is not like seeing it from below. To always see it [the country] as beautiful, you always have to see it from above.” This sentence summarises the popular dream of social ascent: the desire to be on top, not only physically but also metaphorically. Here, ʿĀdil Imām’s star persona and ‘classic’ character, the clever underdog who utilises all kinds of moral and immoral strategies to make his dreams come true and reach the top, is utilised to tip the scales; if you have to choose between two evils, you choose the government, not the fundamentalists.

The film starts with a disclaimer which says that the film is pure fiction and that if any characters in the film resemble real characters, it is wholly coincidental. Khatib (2006,

p. 187) claims that this 'self-censorship' is linked to the emergency laws that allow the president to censor any form of expression prior to publication in the name of 'national security'. I would claim that this disclaimer has very little to do with state censorship. Indeed, it has the dramatic effect of giving the audience the feeling that what they are going to see is actually so close to the real thing that they will be unable to tell fiction from reality. If the disclaimer has anything to do with censorship, I would guess that it is connected with 'street' censorship and that it has been added in order to avoid being sued by groups and individuals who feel targeted by the film.³⁹ And indeed, although it is usually thought that the 'Alī al-Zinātī character was based on Muntaṣir al-Zayyāt,⁴⁰ a lawyer who has become famous for defending imprisoned terrorists, it was the notorious *ḥisba* lawyer Yūsuf al-Badrī⁴¹ who set out to sue the filmmakers; the case was argued for six years before the court finally turned the lawsuit down in February 2001.

The polemic against the fundamentalist

Although several of 'Ādil Imām's films after 1994 mock fundamentalists⁴² it is *The Terrorist* and *Birds of Darkness* that are his main films combating fundamentalism, and in many ways *The Terrorist* set the standard for how Islamic fundamentalism was going to be represented by Egyptian cinema. After *The Terrorist*, the theme has become increasingly common in Egyptian films. But it is still 'Ādil Imām and Waḥīd Ḥāmid who are best known for their anti-Islamist stand. In the following discussion I will attempt to extract and describe the polemic against the fundamentalist in 'Ādil Imām's films. I will mainly take my examples from the aforementioned two films, juxtaposing them with other examples of polemic by the regime and 'Ādil Imām's views outside the films. I will show how this polemic, by 'othering' the fundamentalist and by centring on the reproduction of social values and the fostering of national identity, aims at reinforcing government hegemony in its war on the Islamist challenge.

Generally speaking, we can say that the fundamentalist is essentialized as an extreme 'other' (Khatib, 2006, p. 188), an 'other' whose cause has to be placed firmly outside modernity (Armbrust, 2002a, p. 925) and the national mould. There are several strategies for this 'othering' or creation of distance. One aspect is behaviour. The fundamentalist is often made to speak classical Arabic in situations where it is not natural to do so. In *Birds of Darkness* Faṭḥī points this out when he tells 'Alī to "keep that grammatically correct speech

for the courtroom. We are now sitting in a coffee shop.” Moreover, the fundamentalists differ from normal Egyptians in the way they dress. They usually wear white ‘*salafī-jallābiyyas*’ and are bearded. Only when they need to infiltrate society do they look like other Egyptians. ‘Alī in *The Terrorist* gets rid of his beard to enable him to commit his terrorist attack in Cairo. And in *Birds of Darkness* we see non-bearded fundamentalist lawyers allied with ‘Alī al-Zinātī.

Space is another aspect. In many of the films, the fundamentalist is linked to Upper Egypt or the desert. *The Terrorist* starts off in the Upper Egyptian countryside – a stereotypical site of backwardness. *Birds of Darkness* has an Upper Egyptian connection and the fundamentalist in *The Yacoubian Building* is sent to a terrorist training camp in the desert. Thus the fundamentalist is represented as living on the edge of society, both physically and mentally. *The Terrorist*, for example, constructs a stark opposition between modern enlightenment, here associated with the upper-class bourgeoisie host family living in a spacious villa and enjoying a standard of comfort that is fabulous by Egyptian standards, and the fundamentalists’ backwardness linked to suffering and deprivation (Armbrust, 2002a, p. 924). According to reviewers this dichotomy was heightened by the use of warm and cold light (ibid). The contrast between the room where ‘Alī is being hidden by his fundamentalist comrades and the room where he is being treated by his host family illustrates this point. The first room is empty and silent: there is only a bed, a rug and a faint light bulb hanging from the ceiling. Under the bed there is a grenade chest, and on the wall a small calligraphy with the word *al-ṣabr* (patience). ‘Alī turns off the light. His room becomes a reflection of his dark existence. It isolates him from the outside world (Khatib, 2006, p. 34) and its temptations. The room is for him a retreat from the pleasures of society. The closed space of the room becomes an analogy of ‘Alī’s closed mind (ibid). In contrast, the room at his host family’s house is warm and light: it is fully furnished, and on the walls are posters of American film stars kissing, and leftist symbols like Lenin and Che Guevara. The door is mostly open and family members are coming and going.

President Mubārak constantly portrayed Egyptian Islamism as a product of outside forces, especially alluding to Iranian involvement⁴³ (Barry Rubin, 2002, p. 156). The regime thus minimised any domestic problem. Hints at foreign involvement are therefore common in Egyptian films dealing with fundamentalism. In *Birds of Darkness* ‘Alī claims that they [i.e. the fundamentalists] are being financed through “honest sources: donations from pious and god-fearing people” (*ahl al-birr wa-l-taqwā*), but also “by countries that are zealous about

Islam” (*ghayūra ‘alā al-islām*). That the fundamentalists are supported from outside, places them firmly outside the national discourse and implies that they do not have the nation’s interests in mind. This is an important element in countering the Islamists’ claims, especially since they are often perceived as being the ‘real’ heir of the Egyptian anti-colonial national struggle following the ‘failure’ of Nasserism. ‘Ādil Imām employs the same polemic in interviews, and asks rhetorically: “Who funds them [i.e. the Islamists]? We are funded by the people [alluding to the box-office success of his films]” (cited from ‘Amr Khafājī, 1995). Legitimacy is derived from the Egyptian people. The fundamentalist, on the other hand, is outside, and financed by foreign sources. He lacks this legitimacy and is thus a threat to the nation.

The fundamentalist is not only represented as a threat to the nation but also to the arts and freedom in general. This was the theme in *Asyūt* in 1988, and in *The Terrorist* ‘Alī attacks and smashes both video stores and local Christian jewellery stores: scenes that had become all too familiar from newspaper headlines at the time. In *Birds of Darkness* ‘Alī and his fundamentalist colleges are conspiring to curb freedom. We see the fundamentalist lawyers planning to sue the Ministry of Culture for allowing immoral film posters in the streets (exactly as Yūsuf al-Badrī did in 1993). The meeting is filmed from above in order to increase the feeling of conspiracy.⁴⁴

In *The Terrorist*, the anti-fundamentalist agitator and journalist, a friend of ‘Alī’s host family and a person ‘Alī had tried to kill, is the defender of this freedom.⁴⁵ He is represented as a brave patriot who is willing to risk his life for his beliefs, and even though he receives death threats he refuses even temporarily to leave the country for safety. His only weapon is the pen: because according to him, “the ignorant [i.e. the fundamentalist] fears only knowledge”. One day the host family’s youngest daughter comes home in high dudgeon. She has been given a tape, with an extremist sermon – such tapes were very widespread at that time – exhorting her by intimidation to repent, take the veil and give up her, according to the fundamentalists, sinful job. ‘Alī suggests that they could all at least listen to the tape to see what it has to say, and the journalist, who is committed to freedom of speech, naturally agrees. But to ‘Alī’s surprise, they are all non-receptive to the tape’s fundamentalist rhetoric and the whole family bursts out laughing when they hear the nonsensical hate speech.

Another main theme in most of the films is that the fundamentalist discourse is hypocritical. From the way these films play on the hypocrisy of the fundamentalist

discourse it would seem that they suggest that we have to do with two categories of fundamentalist, both of whom are to be equally condemned. As Lina Khatib (2006, p. 187) points out, we have ‘fake’ fundamentalists – they are in charge, but are there merely for economic and political power. On the other hand we have ‘true’ fundamentalists – they are stupid, blind followers who can’t tell right from wrong, and are exploited by the ‘fake’ fundamentalists and let down when they are not useful any more. These two kinds of fundamentalist clearly lay beneath the following dialogue from *The Terrorist* where ‘Alī’s host family are discussing the phenomena:

Mother: I have no idea where they [i.e. these terrorists] come from. They can’t possibly be Egyptians. It just can’t be that they have drunk from the Nile.

Muḥsin: It’s politics, Mama. They are people who have sold themselves to foreign countries. They are hiding behind religion only to achieve power. They are collaborators [i.e. ‘fake’ fundamentalists].

Father: Not all of them, Muḥsin. There are also poor people amongst them that have fallen under the influence of these groups because of their emptiness (*farāgh*) and ignorance [i.e. ‘true’ fundamentalists].

‘Alī, in *Birds of Darkness*, is an example of a ‘fake’ fundamentalist. At university he used to be a communist, but has changed his allegiance to the Islamists because of money. As Faṭḥī explains, “The communists are weakly financed nowadays; the Brothers [i.e. the fundamentalists or Muslim Brotherhood], though, their [financial] sources are wide open.”

‘Alī ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir, in *The Terrorist*, on the other hand, is a ‘true’ fundamentalist⁴⁶. It is because he is ‘true’ and not ‘fake’ that he can be converted to liberal nationalism, and modern liberal education – the quintessential element of Egyptian modernism – in this film by transferring the fundamentalist from a fundamentalist environment to a liberal educated environment and exposing him to liberal national ideas and feelings of love that pave the way for his conversion.

‘Alī exposes his ignorance on several occasions. He does not know what grapefruit and *niskafēh* are, and he has never heard of Che Guevara, but is attracted to his beard. The ‘true’ fundamentalists’ stupidity and ignorance is also shown in *Birds of Darkness*. Faṭḥī visits ‘Alī in his new Islamist lawyer’s office in Cairo. He delivers blessings to a group of Islamists sitting in the waiting room, to which they respond with a parrot-like ‘amen’. He then goes on ‘blessing’ them by saying, “May God separate you,” to which they respond with the same

‘amen’.⁴⁷ ‘True’ fundamentalists are brainwashed and brainwashing is therefore an important element for portrayal. In *The Terrorist* we see the emir Sayf indoctrinating children by telling them not to watch state TV or read newspapers. He constantly rebuts any question by ‘Alī with “Don’t discuss and don’t question”.⁴⁸ In both *The Terrorist* and *The Yacoubian Building* specific tracts of fundamentalist propaganda were presented. When, in *The Terrorist*, ‘Alī has to contact his comrades through coded speech, he asks for a book in a bookshop:

‘Alī: Do you have *Torment of the Crypt*?

Bookseller: Do you want *Torment or the Crypt*?

‘Alī: There is already torment. Where is the Crypt?

Torment of the Crypt [*adhāb al-qabr*] is a collection of prophetic traditions, Qur’anic passages and commentaries on Heaven and Hell, with the emphasis on Hell. In the eyes of the official media it was a brainwashing tool, but because it was basically a collection of orthodox statements, it was difficult to criticise.⁴⁹ The use of *Torment* in the film therefore contributes to portray the fundamentalists as death-obsessed fanatics (Armbrust, 2002a, p. 925). In *The Yacoubian Building* Ṭāhā al-Shādhilī (Muḥammad Imām⁵⁰) is indoctrinated by the fundamentalist leaders, who exploit his frustrations. Gradually his personality changes into that of the fundamentalist. He lets his beard grow and dons the characteristic white *salafī-jallābiyya*. His relationship with his non-fundamentalist girlfriend Buthayna al-Sayyid (Hind Ṣabrī) sours as he moves further and further away from society. Instead of praying in the small local mosque (*zāwiya*), he now prays in a remote fundamentalist mosque. Also in this film Islamic literature is an aspect of this brainwashing process. Ṭāhā tries to take Buthayna with him on the fundamentalist track by giving her books.⁵¹ The camera focuses enough on the books to show the titles. But Buthayna, who is a life-loving girl, is just as non-receptive of this kind of literature as ‘Alī’s host family in *The Terrorist* were of the tape. When Ṭāhā later gets arrested in an Islamist student demonstration⁵² – the fundamentalist leaders apparently preferred to stay safe behind the curtains, and to give Ṭāhā a leading role in these demonstrations – State Security searches his home and confiscates his books. Ṭāhā is severely tortured by State Security and his books form part of the evidence against him.⁵³

Spinning further on the theme of hypocrisy, the fundamentalist discourse is also represented as contradicting human nature itself. Both ‘Alīs in *The Terrorist* and *Birds of Darkness* have to suppress their human nature and lusts to conform with their fundamentalist morals. Analogous with the importance of fundamentalists’ sexual and

moral discourse in de-legitimising cinema and entertainment, these films make their own use of sexual morals to rebut the fundamentalist position (Shafik, 2007, p. 202). The theme of the fundamentalist being hypocritical about sexuality was developed in *Terrorism and Barbecue*, where the fundamentalist character Rashād's excessive praying was contrasted with his gazing at, and attempting to seduce, the call girl.

In *The Terrorist* this sexual morality becomes a major point around which the ridiculing of the fundamentalist revolves. 'Alī's sexual desire renders his whole religious credibility questionable (ibid, p. 203). When he is being led through the bustling backstreets of Cairo, which are full of temptations, we see him gazing at the wriggling bottom of a woman walking in front of them. Locked up in his hideout, the above-mentioned empty room, we see him fantasising about the neighbour woman, who he can hear laughing and singing outside. 'Alī fantasises about the woman next door – a metaphor for all the pleasures he desires but is denied (Khatib, 2006, p. 35) or has denied himself. He is torn between religious commitment and his voyeurism. At the home of the host family 'Alī is unable not to stare at the youngest daughter. She works in the fashion business, is not ashamed of her body and practises gymnastics to the music of Michael Jackson. Being convinced by his emir that the 'possession' of infidel's women is permissible, he does not hesitate to make a sexual move against her, but is blatantly rejected. The use of morality was also central in *Confession by a Repentant Terrorist*, where the repentant 'Ādil 'Abd al-Bāqī directed his attack at the deviant morality of his former associates (Ismail, 2003, p. 67).

One of the most memorable scenes in *The Terrorist*, which took place at Sawsan's birthday party, played very much on 'Ādil Imām's capabilities as a comedian. 'Alī, the ignorant terrorist, is completely unaccustomed to the conventions of this kind of social gathering. Being afraid of being recognised by an invited security officer, he loudly declares that he is a communist and that he is usually to be found at nightclubs. To be convincing, he pours down drinks and, of course, gets drunk. Here 'Ādil Imām is in his true element. He dances and hugs whoever he comes over of the opposite sex and, as if he considers them a spoil of war, loudly declares, "Welcome Franks and what is left of the Crusaders" while embracing two foreign women, before stumbling up the stairs and, as if from a pulpit in a mosque, delivering a parody of an Islamist hate-speech, addressing the audience with "Oh you people of heresy and hellfire!" (*yā ahl al-bid'a wa-l-nār*), before passing out and falling down the stairs.

But sexual morals and gender roles are also utilised on another level in the contrasting of fundamentalist women and ‘normal’ Egyptian women. The fundamentalist women, covered up in *niqābs*, are usually silent (*The Terrorist*, Morgan Ahmed Morgan⁵⁴ and *Yacoubian Building*). If they do say anything, it is always in the most submissive way, as in *The Terrorist*, where, when the emir Sayf presents ‘Alī to his future wife, she only says “As you like, master”. Additionally, the fundamentalists are represented as treating their women badly: they marry them off to each other as if they were commodities (*The Terrorist* and *The Yacoubian Building*⁵⁵). This point was also made by ‘Ādil ‘Abd al-Bāqī in *Confession by a Repentant Terrorist*⁵⁶. And in *The Terrorist* we see the emir shouting and gesturing at his wives as he would do with animals (Khatib, 2006, p. 195) and hushing them away once ‘Alī knocks on the door. This is contrasted to ‘normal’ Egyptian women, who are represented as active, working outside the home and taking part equally in conversations with the men, as seen in ‘Alī’s host family in *The Terrorist*.

Also in *Birds of Darkness*, the sexual aspect is made use of. ‘Alī, here a ‘fake’ fundamentalist, is not ridiculed in the same way as his namesake in *The Terrorist*. On the contrary, his fundamentalism makes him a bore. When the prostitute Samīra wants to give ‘Alī a hug to thank him for having defended her at court, Ali tries to escape and we get the following dialogue:

Fathī: You know he doesn’t like being kissed.

Samīra: What does he like then?

Fathī: He actually doesn’t like anything at all.

When Samīra serves them food, ‘Alī refuses to eat. He doesn’t want to eat food that is illicit (*ḥarām*), thus recalling Islamist protests and boycotts of the serving of *iftār*-meals financed by famous belly dancers who, for fundamentalists and many ordinary conservatives, are to be likened to prostitutes. In reply Fathī sarcastically remarks that she is innocent in the eyes of the law. But ‘Alī is not a bore by nature; it is his fundamentalism that makes him one. He was different before he became a fundamentalist. He used to play the Oud and sing. At emotional moments, when he expresses his real feelings and not his ‘fake’ ones, he sometimes still does. When Fathī says: “Hope you haven’t quit playing. If you have, you would really be a bore,” he plays and they sing together *Slowly, slowly! Swing! [yā wāsh yā wāsh yā Murgīḥa]*.⁵⁷ Music and song, despised by some fundamentalist groups for their alleged sexual temptation yet ruled as not contradictory to Islamic law by al-Azhar, are in several of these films contrasted with fundamentalism. When ‘Alī in *The Terrorist* is asked by his host

family whether he prefers ‘Amr Diyāb, ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ or Michael Jackson – an essential question aimed at cultural distinction in the secular liberal bourgeoisie class – he replies that “for God they are all the same.” ‘Alī thus places himself outside that community. But after his conversion, we see him in the shower for the first time, singing *Why are you wronging me?* [*bituẓlumūnī lēh?*] by ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ, before he again suppresses his real feelings with “I ask God’s forgiveness!” (*astaghfar allāh al-‘aẓīm*). It is again no coincidence that it is a ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm song he sings. ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm is not only a symbol of love and nostalgic longing but also an icon of secular Nasserist nationalism.

Moreover, the Islamic fundamentalists are corrupt and hypocritical in their participation in national politics. Since they can’t run for elections themselves – the regime refuses to legalise any religious political parties – they are, as can be seen in *Birds of Darkness*, backing certain ‘secular’ candidates in exchange for favours (Khatib, 2006, p. 186). Faṭḥī comments: “You [i.e. the Islamist here alluding to the Brotherhood] are a movement which is unable to become a party while we [i.e. the NDP] are a party which is unable to become a movement.” So the secular lawyer Faṭḥī needs ‘Alī’s help in mobilising the support of the fundamentalists for his corrupt candidate. When ‘Alī protests by saying that the candidate is corrupt, he is told that “It’s this corruption that lets you [i.e. the Islamists] exist.” The fundamentalists are actually dependent on the government and are only able to act in the political field because of the government’s goodwill. But the government doesn’t come off any better here. The anti-Islamist theme in ‘Ādil Imām’s films is integrated into his anti-corruption line – the other main leitmotif of most of his films. Faṭḥī reminds ‘Alī that “The government is clever. It has left you the mosques. Let you publish books, hold interviews, all this to prove that it is democratic,” to which ‘Alī replies: “and we are very pleased with that kind of democracy”. In an interview with a foreign journalist ‘Alī is asked to explain the Islamic movement’s position on violence. Here the hypocrisy is again exposed, as he answers very vaguely. The fundamentalists, even when acting in ‘non-violent’ fields, are usually connected to terrorism. In *Birds of Darkness* the fundamentalist lawyer ‘Alī defends imprisoned brothers. He visits them in prison and facilitates communication between them and terrorists outside through an Islamic investment company. All this on orders from a man in western dress addressed as ‘master’ (*mawlānā*). In this way the film implies that they all – the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamic investment companies and Islamist lawyers – are equally involved in terrorism, thus strategically blurring the lines between different aspects of the Islamic trend.

But denouncing and mocking Islamists is only one strategy. In confronting fundamentalism, these films also try to recapture religion for the nation or to put forward an authentic positive alternative version of religion. The regime has constantly asserted that it is composed of believing Muslims loyal to the message of the Prophet. In a similar way 'Ādil Imām claims: "I also belong to 'the Islamic trend' and I am also zealous about my religion" (cited from Khafājī, 1995). 'Alī's host family in *The Terrorist* is tolerant and liberal. Although the fundamentalists would call them infidels, they are just as good Muslims as anybody else. Their Islamic identity is confirmed when 'Alī is about to take farewell with the family, just before his true identity is exposed, by the mother giving him an amulet with the 'throne verse'.⁵⁸ When she discovers his true 'terrorist' identity, she says, "My son, religion [is supposed to be] easy (*al-dīn yusr*) and [full of] mercy (*rahma*)."

The well-known ḥadīth '*al-dīn yusr wa laysa 'usr*' (Religion is easy, not difficult), together with the focus on 'mercy' instead of 'torment', sums up the liberal version of Islam, as opposed to that of the fundamentalists. Religious belief is supposed to make life easier and not complicate matters for the believer. In its sound enlightened version religion is no obstacle to development. In the film, the same position of Islamic enlightenment is also clearly stated by Muḥsin when, at the hospital, he sees all the new imported equipment and comments: "When are we going to catch up with the world [i.e. the west]? Instead of progressing we are quarrelling about whether we should enter the bathroom with the right or the left foot first." So although it denounces fundamentalism, the film contends that religion is an integral part of the Egyptian national identity. In the same interview in *Rūz al-Yūsuf* 'Ādil Imām states that "The Prophet loved his country, he loved Mecca and when he was driven out of it he wept" (ibid), thus emphasising how patriotism and religious belief are two sides of the same coin.

Thus Egyptian anti-Islamist films do not fall into the trap of becoming anti-Islamic, as several Hollywood films are perceived to be. Tolerant, enlightened Islam is an integral element of Egyptian nationalism, while fundamentalism is represented as a moral aberration (or, in religious terms; *bid'a* - heresy) from this kind of sound religious belief, an aberration caused by ignorance (i.e. the 'real' fundamentalist) and egoism/opportunism (i.e. the 'fake' fundamentalist) that does not shrink from using criminal methods, and that is a threat to the nation. Fundamentalism is not only an aberration but also a corruption of 'true' Islam. In this way it is the fundamentalist understanding of religion that becomes *bid'a* and not society, as many fundamentalists claim. Fundamentalism is thus linked to corruption, as can be seen in, for example, *Birds of Darkness*. Fundamentalism is only one side

of the same coin, corruption being the other. “We are against all that is corrupt,” ‘Ādil Imām explains (ibid). In this way the ‘real’ fundamentalist is analogous to corruption caused by greed (*fasād al-jasha*): the source of both is selfishness, while the ‘fake’ fundamentalist could be linked to corruption caused by need (*fasād al-hāja*). The glue that holds the nation together, and which makes up the alternative to these two kinds of deviations, is Egyptian patriotism in its enlightened version. Sound traditional Egyptian values countering egoism and selfishness are combined with modern education and enlightenment countering ignorance.

The discourse of national unity

The discussion of the perceived fundamentalist threat against the modern Egyptian secular state is closely connected to one of the basic concepts of Egyptian nationalism – the discourse of national unity. This is a discourse in which Christians and Muslims are always referred to as ‘the two elements of the nation’. Unity here means the unity of these two elements: the Crescent and the Cross. Thus if there were no Christian there would be nothing to unite. Therefore the Christian as an abstract assumes some importance.

The Muslim fundamentalist, because he allegedly places religion over nation, threatens this national unity. This discourse of national unity must not be confused with Coptic nationalism, as Khatib seems to do, when she says that “these films seem to prefer a selective integration, celebrating the nationalism of the Copts while portraying Islamic fundamentalists as intolerant of people from other religions” (Khatib, 2006, p. 191). Coptic nationalism, in the sense of Coptic separatism, is – although in *The Terrorist* maybe in a more subtle way – excluded in the same way. In the same way as ‘Alī in *The Terrorist* fables about establishing a purely Muslim fundamentalist state that excludes Christians, the wife of the film’s Christian character Hānī, ‘Alī’s host family’s neighbour, harbours very similar opinions. She constantly harasses her husband Hānī with religious obligations. He is not allowed to drink or watch television, he has to listen to sermons, and she wants him to quit his job because she considers it inappropriate in relation to religion. She even threatens that if he fails to comply, she will leave for America. Her fundamentalism is thus connected to the Coptic lobby in the USA, which many Egyptians perceive as the Christian side of the same fundamentalist coin. The film therefore implies that not only Islamic fundamentalism,

as has been mentioned, is financed from outside, and is thus foreign to the Egyptian national body, but that also Christian fundamentalism has a strong foreign connection.

These films, therefore – and this is true of all Egyptian films that include Coptic characters – rather than ‘celebrating Coptic nationalism’ silence any difference between ‘the two elements of the nation’ other than the difference in worship: Crescent / Cross and church / mosque. That is why, in *The Terrorist*, the Islamic fundamentalist character ‘Alī initially doesn’t even recognise Hānī as Christian: in Egyptian cinema, the ultimate sign of the presumably even national fabric (Shafik, 2007, p. 51). Only later, when ‘Alī is sitting with Hānī’s little daughter on his knee, does he discover that she is wearing a cross under her pullover. ‘Alī, who had perceived Hānī to be a good and religious person, is thoroughly shocked and disappointed and he hushes her away and refuses to talk to her any more.

The film also explicitly idealises Hānī’s patriotism and noble character. He is not merely a passive ‘element of the nation.’ He took part as a doctor in the October War, and when ‘Alī, after his true identity has been exposed, seeks refugee from the police in Hānī’s house and takes his daughter and wife as hostages, he not only saves him from the police but also volunteers to give him medical treatment. The scene in which ‘Alī is ‘converted’ to Egyptian nationalism also reconciles ‘the two elements in the nation’, as both of them stand up, give each other a hug and congratulate each other on the goal.

The host family and their neighbour Hānī both represent the ‘sound’ elements of the nation. Hānī’s fundamentalist wife and ‘Alī, on the other hand, are its rotten or corrupted components. Thus honour and blame are equally distributed between ‘the two elements of the nation’ and national unity retained. Hānī’s comment that “if everybody [i.e. Christians and Muslims] would just stick to their religion, we would have solved most of our problems,” plays into the same rhetoric. By ‘stick to their religion’ is here meant not to deviate into a corruption of that religion, i.e. fundamentalism, but to keep to the sound and healthy beliefs.

The Terrorist is somewhat exceptional for its time in that it accords the Coptic element such a large role in the film. Although several of Egypt’s most distinguished film makers are Christians, explicit Coptic characters in Egyptian cinema have been few and far between. The fact that historically the Copts have refused to claim minority status, instead cementing themselves into a national identity discourse, while on the other hand seeking to forge a separate space for themselves that excludes the dominant Muslim other, has affected their willingness to openly represent their own community (Mehrez, 2008, p. 192).

In this way the film is typical, in that the Coptic element's *raison d'être* in Egyptian cinema is to project national unity and thus bring about balance, showing that fundamentalism is a problem in both religions. *The Terrorist*, being not only an anti-Islamist but also a nationalist film, explains the need for including the Christian element. *Birds of Darkness*, on the other hand, being basically a film about corruption, in which fundamentalism is only one aspect of this corruption, therefore does not need a Christian element. Another reason why it was timely to provide this anti-Islamist film with a message of national unity was that in 1994, the same year that the film was released, a conference on minorities in the Middle East, in which Egyptian Copts were supposed to take part, was to be held in Egypt. The conference, which was organised by the Private Ibn Khaldoun Centre headed by Sa'd al-Dīn Ibrāhīm and the Minority Right Group in London, gave rise to a highly charged debate in the media and had to be moved to Limassol in Cyprus. One of the conference's most forthright critics was Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal, and the controversy centred upon the idea that the Copts were a minority. It touched the very core of the Egyptian national discourse of national unity in which Muslims and Copts are always addressed as 'the two elements of the nation', never alluding to the Copts as a minority.

On the other hand sectarian disturbances and alleged persecution of Copts in Egypt, combined with the lobbying by the exile Coptic community in the U.S., caused the Egyptian government considerable embarrassment. The terrorist attacks on Christians in Egypt not only threatened to break up the national unity but it was also feared that it would pave the way for foreign intervention; and, indeed, in Haykal's opinion the conference was just the first step towards foreign intervention in Egypt's internal affairs. *The Terrorist* was therefore not only an attack on the Muslim fundamentalist threat but also a reconfirmation that secular Egyptian nationalism was still going strong and that Egypt would not accept any foreign interference, be it from Muslim fundamentalists financed from abroad or Coptic fundamentalists seeking support from the USA.

Hassan and Murqus

With the escalation of confrontations between Copts and Muslims throughout the 1990s, and especially in the aftermath of the sectarian violence in the village of al-Kōsha in 2000 that claimed 22 lives, the government decided to take Coptic representation on the screen into its own hands (Mehrez, 2008, p. 192). This resulted in the Ramadan serial *Time of Roses*

[*Awān al-ward*] (2000) written by Waḥīd Ḥāmid, a serial that called for national unity and solidarity and that was intended as a lesson in ‘moderate’ religious values for both Muslims and Christians. But with its symbolic representation of national unity through the, from a Coptic point of view, socially and religiously unacceptable marriage between a Coptic woman and a Muslim man, it backfired. The serial outraged many in the Coptic community, and rather than promoting national unity it caused controversy along sectarian lines. The pressure forced the script of the final episodes to be changed and the Coptic woman was made to recognise that her marriage to a Muslim was a mistake. This incident shows the dangers that this thorny issue represents.

It therefore seems reasonable that ‘Ādil Imām, when he decided to take the theme of ‘the two elements of the nation’ on screen in the film *Hassan and Murqus* in 2008 would take care to avoid falling into the same pitfall as *Time of Roses*. If anything, sectarian violence had only increased in recent years, and controversies of national proportion like the ones surrounding *Time of Roses* and the film *I love Cinema* [*Baḥibb al-Sīma*] (2004) had moved the issue onto centre-stage in the national consciousness. The example of Iraq, with its increasing sectarian violence following the U.S. invasion of the country, was an additional reminder of the danger that sectarianism posed. ‘Ādil Imām states: “[It] is a threat to our national security, and we can't stand still” (N. N., 2007).

And again, as *The Terrorist* was Egyptian cinema’s first frontal attack on Islamic fundamentalism, so *Hassan and Murqus* was the first Egyptian film to take the thorny issue of sectarianism as its main theme. In focusing on and parodying the mutual distrust between ‘the two elements of the nation’ rather than simply projecting a picture of unity, and by acknowledging that the problem had reached such a magnitude, the film definitely pushed some limits. But *The Terrorist* confidently confirms a strong Egyptian nationalism in the face of both an external and an internal, fundamentalist threat, *Hassan and Murqus* seems to set out to reconfirm or re-establish the same national unity – a unity that appears to be under severe threat – placing its hope in the coming generation.

In one of the first scenes we are at the inaugural session of the 51st Conference of National Unity, one of the frequent official conferences held to foster the supposed feelings of love and brotherhood between Muslims and Christians. But as we watch the priests and imams enter the scene, the camera focuses first on two priests and then on two imams, and we see them both complaining about the other. “What’s the point with conferences, we [Christians] can wait another hundred years without getting our rights,” says one of the

priests. “We are not able to build churches, nor even renovate a toilet, without asking for permission from the Ministry, which takes ages to get. That’s how it is. Can any of our sons obtain important positions in the government? Tell me, how many Christian ministers are there? Only kisses, hugs and conferences. You can change what I say but not what I think (*illi fī l-qalb fī l-qalb yā kinīsa*).” “Persecuted, they say? It is we [Muslims] who are persecuted,” complains an imam. “Every time we build a mosque, they have to put up a church right in front of it. Three-quarters of the country’s money is in their hands. Is there any job they have not taken? Bank managers, presidents of administrative councils and large companies, they are all Christians. Have you ever seen a Christian beggar? And then they complained that their feasts were not official holidays until they all became official holidays. Our feasts with their feasts, the whole year has become a holiday and there’s nobody working anymore.”

Inside the conference again we see the same priests and imams hand in hand, as people are accustomed to see them in the official Egyptian media, shouting “Long live, the Crescent with the Cross.” The film is definitely bold in breaking this taboo and admitting that sectarian hatred is ripe in Egypt, something that the government has always tried to deny. But this is also the only bold thing about the film. The film as a whole insists on avoiding touching on any taboos which could have undermined the message of unity, and it therefore refuses to leave the standard script of national unity.

The film aroused controversy already before shooting began. I guess that in the light of the Coptic community’s recent active involvement in fending off intrusions into, and perceived misrepresentations of, their separate space, ‘Ādil Imām took the script to the Pope Shanūda, allegedly for approval. In doing so, he broke with the long-established consensus among the secular cultural players of excluding any third parties, by which is meant religious individuals and institutions, from the process of censorship. ‘Ādil Imām later retreated, claiming that it was only to learn about Christian religious practice in order to represent it correctly in the film, though he admitted that the Pope had demanded the change of his role from priest to religious preacher because under no circumstances can a priest put on other clothes (cited from Munā ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, 2008).

The film is a comedy of mixed identities. Būlus (‘Ādil Imām) is a Christian preacher and professor of theology who believes in national unity. He is being threatened by Christian extremists and has to escape. The State Security give him and his family new ID-cards. He becomes Ḥasan al-‘Aṭṭār and has to live under cover as a Muslim. In the meantime,

but independently, a similar story is unfolding with Shaykh Maḥmūd (ʿUmar al-Sharīf). To escape Islamic fundamentalists, who are threatening him because he refuses to become the leader of their group, he too is given a new identity. He becomes the Christian Murquṣ ʿAbd al-Shahīd. Both men end up in opposite flats in the same building and they become friends, of course without either knowing the other's true identity and both thinking that they belong to the same religion.

Because of the sensitivity of the subject the film is very concerned with retaining the balance between 'the two elements'. If the first scene is a mosque, the next scene has to be a church, and a scene with a Christian fundamentalist has to be balanced against a Muslim one. It is also this concern for balance that demands the presence of an actor of the calibre of ʿUmar al-Sharīf as ʿĀdil Imām's opposite number in the film. In its concern with balance the scenario's credibility seems to suffer. And as Midḥat Bishāy (2008) comments, a Christian preacher having a bomb planted in his car by Christian fundamentalists, especially when the film gives no hint of him having broken with any of the Church's traditions, is not very convincing. On the other hand, a Shaykh who refuses to become an extremist group's leader is hardly a strategic target for a terrorist attack. These scenes can only be interpreted against the background of the balancing act between the two sects to avoid falling into the pitfall of being biased towards one or the other of the two.

Būlus, Maḥmūd and their respective families are an allegory for 'the two elements' of the Egyptian nation. They are patriotic, of high morals and both are anchored in sound and enlightened religious beliefs, while the society around them is afflicted by sectarianism, fundamentalism and religious hatred. The two protagonists are destined to remain together. The film is full of allusions to their shared destiny: "Where are we heading, Ḥasan?" "It seems that our destiny is one, Murquṣ", and on the film's billboard we see them standing beside each other, handcuffed together. To live together as 'two elements' is destiny and a moral imperative; sectarianism, on the other hand, is a moral deviation.

Like *The Terrorist*, this film set moderate, enlightened religious values up against fundamentalist extremism and ignorance. In the opening scene we see Shaykh Maḥmūd praying. "My God, help me with what you taught me, and teach me what helps me. Increase my knowledge." Simultaneously Būlus and his son are praying in church, "King of Peace, give us your peace." These prayers, focusing as they do on knowledge, love and peace, are contrasted with the ignorance, hate and sectarianism of the fundamentalists in both religions. Būlus and his family, after having changed their identity, are first sent to al-Minyā

in Upper Egypt by State Security. Again Upper Egypt is the stereotypical site of backwardness. Here he is mistaken for a famous Islamic fundamentalist preacher and soon finds himself with a large group of blind followers. He is forced to lead the community in prayer and heal childless women – a sign of superstition and ignorance – and the local State Security accuse him of being a member of al-Qāʿida. In the mosque Būlus is put to answering legal inquiries from the local community. Lacking all knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence, he tosses the questions over to the local imam, asking him, “So what does religion have to say about this issue?” and the ignorant community shouts “*allāhu akbar*” in satisfaction at the answers. Only one question does he answer himself. A man who is being beaten by his wife asks for a fatwa, and Būlus answers: “A woman like that doesn’t need a fatwa, she should be handed over to the public prosecutor.” Būlus thus reinforces the state’s role over that of religion.

Another common strategy the film employs in dealing with the Coptic issue is to recall the alleged lost paradise of national unity and the golden age of liberalism. The anti-colonial demonstrations of 1919, with priests speaking in the mosques and the imams in the churches, have become a national cliché, made famous through the filmization of Nagīb Maḥfūz’s trilogy and reproduced and alluded to in several nationalist films. In *Hassan and Murqus*⁵⁹ the ‘good old days’ are recalled through an anecdote about cinema. In a flat in Alexandria the two families, each still unaware of the other’s identity and thinking that the other family belongs to the same religion as they do, are watching television, and when Nagīb al-Rīḥānī’s musical comedy *Candy Floss* [*Ghazal al-Banāt*] (1949), of which they are all very fond, comes on screen Būlus comments that “It was the great writer Badī al-Khayrī who wrote for Nagīb al-Rīḥānī.” Maḥmūd says, “He was a Christian,” whereupon Būlus explains: “Well, that was what al-Rīḥānī also thought. But when Badī al-Khayrī’s mother died and he went to offer him his condolences, he found Qur’an-recitation at the funeral. So he asked: ‘What is this? You are a Muslim!’” ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘So why didn’t you tell me?’ And Badī answered: ‘Because you didn’t ask me’.” The point is, of course, as Būlus explains, “That was how it was in the past, in the good old days,” when one could not differentiate a Christian from a Muslim. But unfortunately this is not how it is today. So Maḥmūd inquires anxiously “So Nagīb al-Rīḥānī was a Christian?”, which Būlus confirms, and Maḥmūd – who is Muslim – does not seem at all happy about learning that his beloved al-Rīḥānī has turned out to be a Christian. In contrast to the golden age even our protagonists are inflicted with

sectarianism, but hope can be placed in the coming generation, who we see in love, gazing into each other's eyes.

The neighbours, on the other hand, are suspicious of a Christian family that befriends a Muslim. And when a Christian boy, who has fallen in love with Fāṭima, Maḥmūd's daughter, who he, of course, thinks is Christian and called Maryam, discovers that she goes out with Girgis (Muḥammad Imām), Būlus' son, who they all think is a Muslim and is called 'Imād, the whole neighbourhood clashes in a street brawl between the Muslim and Christian neighbours. Here the film touches on one of the thorniest issues of sectarianism in Egypt: the issue of mixed relationships. It was this kind of 'unacceptable' relationship that was the main point of controversy that forced the script of *Awān al-Ward* to be changed. But the film refuses to involve itself in the problem, and neatly solves it without getting lost in forbidden territory. At first both families welcome the relationship. They cannot be blamed, as they both think it is totally uncontroversial, because, with their mixing of identities, they think the others share the same religion as them. But when Girgis, Būlus' son, intends to propose to Fāṭima, who he thinks is Christian like himself, they have to reveal their true identities. They are both shocked and disappointed, and back home we see them with their respective families. Fāṭima and her mother now have their *ḥijābs* and *niqābs* back on, and their parents are blaming the other family for having lied and cheated them. These scenes, in which the sectarian hatred grows in them, are juxtaposed with Christian and Muslim preachers holding hate speeches against the other sect in churches and mosques, before the masses storm out to battle each other in the name of the Cross and the Crescent. As the clashes erupt, both families have already decided to leave for Cairo again. Now that it turns out that he is a Christian Būlus is no longer to be trusted, and like a real fundamentalist Maḥmūd now locks his wife and daughter in their room in order to go to the station and buy the tickets. But on his return Maḥmūd finds that a street battle has broken out and a Molotov cocktail has put the two families' flats on fire. Būlus manages to save Maḥmūd's daughter and wife from the fire. Sheikh Maḥmūd reaches out his hand to Būlus and the camera focuses on the two hands holding each other tightly: national unity is re-established and the two families walk out, leaving the chaos behind them.

The film is a nationalist statement calling for unity and solidarity in order to save the nation. It calls on sound, moderate, enlightened religious values: values that lead to unity, as opposed to fundamentalism, which threatens to break up this unity. Destiny and morality are called upon to keep the Egyptians on the right national path. In recalling the

‘good old days’, setting them up as an ideal and comparing them with the present ‘Ādil Imām is following the tradition of al-Muwayliḥī of ‘exposing the manners and customs’, thus clearly remaining inside the accepted realist-reformist paradigm of social comment in order to reform. The message here is therefore conservative and again concerned with bringing Egypt back on the right track. ‘Ādil Imām says he hopes that “Christians and Muslims will leave the cinema and embrace and kiss one another” (cited from Yolade Kell, 2008). For that to happen the film avoids all controversial issues and is obsessed with maintaining the balance between the sects. I would claim that the boldness of ‘Ādil Imām’s confrontation with sectarianism is of limited value; rather than confront the underlying causes, he reproduces and repacks the same traditional hegemonic discourse of national unity.

Conclusion

Fundamentalism, both in its Islamic and Christian version, is represented as being foreign and incompatible with Egyptian identity, and the anti-fundamentalist line is a main component of ‘Ādil Imām’s films. In confronting fundamentalism, two main strategies are employed. Fundamentalism is contrasted with modernity. This is in line with the government’s strategy of restoring its modern image in alliance with secular cultural players. On the other hand, fundamentalism is also contrasted with sound religious values. This again is in line with the government’s second strategy of confronting fundamentalism by challenging its claim to orthodoxy in alliance with orthodox institutional Islam. Both strategies are utilised in ‘Ādil Imām’s films. The first dominated *The Terrorist* while the second is stronger in *Hassan and Murqus*.

The ‘straight path’ projected in these films is one by which the nation is supposed to be progressing on its way to modernity while retaining its religious identity without falling into fundamentalism. Fundamentalism is therefore a deviation from this straight path, or a corruption. This nationalist discourse is a moral one, in which people are being coerced back onto the right track by being shown the vices (fundamentalism) that should be avoided and the virtues (sound religious values and modernism) that should be respected, very much in al-Muwayliḥī’s tradition of ‘exposing the manners and customs’. This again is not unlike the fundamentalists’ own grid of dividing the world into *ḥalāl* (licit) and *ḥarām* (illicit) and through the concept of ‘*al-amr bi-l-ma’rūf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar*’ (to enjoin good

and forbid evil) othering deviations and corruptions of their own ‘straight path’ as *kufr* (infidelity) and *irtidād* (apostasy); morality is the area of convergence between the two discourses.

Armbrust (2002a) compared *The Terrorist* to another later ‘high-brow’ Egyptian anti-Islamist film *The Closed Doors* [*al-abwāb al-mughlaqa*] (1999), and he concludes that ‘Ādil Imām’s film, even with its propagandistic surface, is much more skilfully enmeshed in Egyptian history – and I would say political discourse – than *The Closed Doors*, which could seem to be hermetically sealed from broad Egyptian audiences (Armbrust, 2002a, p. 922). I would add to this the suggestion that the above-mentioned structural analogy between the discourse in these films and that of the Islamists – of course in addition to ‘Ādil Imām’s enormous popularity – may be the key to understanding how these films may be much more effective and influential than many equally anti-Islamist high-brow films.

Renewed anti-modernism

The string of films written by Waḥīd Ḥāmid and directed by Sharīf ‘Arafa, all of which had been perceived as embodying serious political undertones, in addition to the outright attack on the Islamic fundamentalists in *The Terrorist*, had definitely transformed ‘Ādil Imām from the vulgarian intellectuals loved to hate into a hero of the secular state. If it is true that this transformation, and the return of the rhetoric of modernism and patriotism in these films, is connected with the ‘Islamist threat’, then it would not be unlikely that this rhetoric would lose momentum and be submerged if the threat disappeared. Ali (2003) claims that “the mid-1990s were a peculiarly open moment for the security-conscious and autocratic Egyptian state. President Ḥusnī Mubārak had been re-elected to his third term in office, the Islamic insurgency of the early 1990s had been brutally crushed and the regime was proud of its international status in the revived Middle East peace process.” He further asserts that the producers of *Sleeping in Honey* – a film which he claims has a more confrontational tone to it than *Terrorism and Barbecue* – may have taken advantage of this particular opening to suggest a more democratic society (ibid). I am not sure whether I agree that *Sleeping in Honey* really calls for a more democratic society, or that the latter half of the 1990s really saw some signs of an opening up towards a more pluralistic political system. It must not be forgotten that, from the very beginning of his reign, President Ḥusnī Mubārak had promised reform and that the promise of reform and economic progress is one of the very

pillars on which the regime's legitimacy rests. The discourse of modernism is in itself one of reform, and political discourse in Egypt, on the part of both the government and the opposition, is reform-oriented. I would therefore claim that 'the call for reform', as long as it remains within the accepted limits, is an integral part of the dominant ideology of modernism and not necessarily a sign of boldness. But if it is true that the latter half of the 1990s saw some openings towards a more pluralistic society, I would still maintain that *Sleeping in Honey* – which, because of 'Ādil Imām's enthusiasm for *Birds of Darkness*, was postponed for some time – with its exaggerated allegory of impotence and modernist rhetoric of 'ilm versus jahl elevating and educating the masses, rather belongs to the repressive atmosphere of the early 1990s.

If the 'new political situation' of the latter half of the 1990s – a confident regime and the failure of the Islamists' violent strategy – had any influence on 'Ādil Imām's films, it would seem that it led to some wavering in, and submergence of, the modernist rhetoric which he had established through his films in the first half of the 1990s and a return to some kind of vulgarity. While his films scripted by Waḥīd Ḥāmid, as has been shown, had a patriotic and moral discourse with a focus on duty, those from the latter half of the 1990s are a 'mixed lot', and it is probably this 'mixed lot' that led Armbrust (2002b, p. 241) to guess that 'Ādil Imām's 'media transformation' from the 'vulgarian intellectuals loved to hate' into the 'hero of the secular state', may have been only of a temporary nature. Although some of the films from the period were nationalist, the overall picture is a return to vulgarity and in many of the films also the pre-1990s formula of failed modernism or anti-modernism. If 'Ādil Imām, through his collaboration with Waḥīd Ḥāmid and Sharīf 'Arafa, had given the regime and elite the modernist and anti-fundamentalist films they wanted, it would seem that 'Ādil Imām might have thought the time was ripe again to give 'the people' what *they* wanted.

In 1995 the film *Bakhit and Adila*, written by Līnīn al-Ramlī and directed by Nādir Galāl, was released. This film was a comedy supposedly without any political content. "I want to see people laugh," 'Ādil Imām said (N. N., 1994). But because of the perceived lack of any political content, the film was not well received by most critics. Irīz Naẓmī sees the film as an unjustified step backwards: to farce and slapstick and a return to comedy for its own sake, without any serious message, a kind of comedy that 'Ādil Imām did over twenty years ago (Naẓmī, 1995); and Maḥmūd Sa'd writes "Oh Abū Rāmī⁶⁰ – you are greater than Bakhīt!" explaining that "if comedy for its own sake has become a noble cause then I don't think I am

mistaken when I say that it would be more noble to laugh while at the same time contemplating our situation” (Sa‘d, 1995). But initially the credit he had earned with the critics through his ‘serious’ social comedies made most of the critics accept this deviation as a well-deserved break.

On the other hand the film was very well received by popular audiences. It broke all previous box-office records, becoming the – until then – best-selling Egyptian film in history; and in 1997 the success of *Bakhit and Adila* was reinvested, on ‘Ādil Imām’s request (‘Afāf ‘Alī, 1997), in a second *Bakhit and Adila* film with the sub-title *The Bucket and the Teapot*, which again broke all previous box-office records.⁶¹ A third film featuring Bakhīt and ‘Adīla, *Hello America*, was released in 2000.

These three films are about a couple with the silly-sounding names of Bakhīt Hinayda’ al-Mihēṭal (‘Ādil Imām) and ‘Adīla Ṣandūq (Shirīn), who all of a sudden get their hands on a lot of money. In all three they start off poor and deprived. Suddenly ‘a bag full of money’ ‘falls’ into their hands, enabling them to start on a tour of ‘exposing’, only to lose it all and end up broke again. In the first *Bakhit and Adila* film the ‘bag full of money’ falls into their hands by accident, the result of a switch of suitcases between a drug dealer (Muṣṭafā Mutawallī) and Bakhīt on a train. A tour of exposing the rottenness of the rich then begins and they are naturally cheated by everyone and end up back where they began. In the second film they are again back at zero. Poor and deprived as they are, they are unable to marry or even find a flat, and without protection are abused and humiliated by everyone. When ‘Adīla hears of the benefits, especially the diplomatic immunity, members of parliament enjoy, they decide to nominate themselves for election, and a new tour of exposing takes place – this time of parliamentary life and elections. That’s where the sub-title comes in, the ‘bucket’ and ‘teapot’ being nonsensical symbols which candidates are given to enable illiterate electors to recognise them – “Long live the bucket!” “Vote for the Teapot!”⁶² The official candidates are naturally given more meaningful symbols, such as a camel or a crescent. A drug gang offers them their support in the election campaign in return for future services, and again large amounts of money is handed over in bags. So while the social ascent in part one was a means to expose the corruption among the nouveaux riches, it here serves the same function of exposing the corruption of parliamentary life or ‘the election mafia’, and in entering parliament the film claims to be bold. ‘Ādil Imām later explained that it ran into trouble with the censorship authorities. In 1997, the year the film was released, several members of parliament were under

investigation for corruption, and only five years earlier a drugs league in parliament had been exposed (Manāl Lāshīn, 1997).⁶³ In the film, the drugs league support Bakhīt and ‘Adīla’s election campaign because ‘their man’ in parliament had fallen, thus recalling the five-year-old scandal. The last scene of the film is a caricature of Egyptian parliament. Bakhīt and ‘Adīla, who themselves have entered parliament only for personal gain, are surprised when, as the first session opens, they find themselves surrounded by the three most corrupt crooks from the first film. On their left is the businessman (‘Izzat Abū ‘Ūf), now a bearded, grim-looking Islamist, who cheated them of their money in the first film, and on their right they find the drug dealer (Muṣṭafā Mutawallī) to whom the bag of money and cocaine in the first film had belonged. And to complete the picture, the Speaker of the Assembly turns out to be the very same bank director (Ḥasan Ḥusnī) who, in the first film, had cheated them and run away with the cocaine they had deposited in his bank.⁶⁴ The film thus ends with a conclusion similar to the one in *Birds of Darkness* of a political life hijacked by crooks.

But was it bold? ‘Ādil Imām himself says that the film only passed the censors after the President himself had seen it (al-Shinnāwī, 2007). According to ‘Ādil Imām, the President consented to the film by saying: “He who has a wound on his head will keep touching it” (*illi ‘alā rāsu baṭḥa yiḥassis ‘alēha*) (cited from Sarḥān, 2006), which means that ‘a crook will always give himself away’. This statement could illustrate the regime’s position on corruption. Even though one might suspect that corruption in Egypt is part of the system and a necessity for the regime to endure – close supporters are allowed to exploit their positions in order, under the threat of prosecution, to ensure their absolute loyalty – the government likes to present itself as fighting corruption. The occasional ousting or prosecution of corrupt businessmen and members of the regime thus enables the regime both to ensure the support and loyalty of its remaining clients and at the same time to present itself as the upholder and defender of law and order. In that way ‘Ādil Imām’s ‘anti-establishment’ films ‘exposing’ and mocking corrupt businessmen and politicians become a part of the system.

The ‘exposing bit’ in these films thus is very similar to, and maybe more clearly stated than in, many of ‘Ādil Imām’s ‘consciousness’ rising films from the first half of the 1990s. All show the negative sides and how things are not supposed to be. But contrary to his films from the early 1990s, though like his films of the late 1970s and 1980s, they do not project any alternative. Although the narrative takes place in an atmosphere of failed

modernism and the films don't project any modernist solution, the ideology of modernity is still implicit understood. These films are therefore hardly anti-modernist in the sense that they are against modernism; they mirror modernist ideology by representing and 'exposing' its opposite. The characters Bakhīt and 'Adīla represent the deprived Egyptian masses' dream of rapid social ascent and the 'bag full of money' becomes a symbol of the impossibility of attaining that dream. The bags are always from morally dubious sources and they always come suddenly or by accident, indicating that the dream can only be realised through a good portion of luck and/or immorality. As in *Birds of Darkness*, not only the 'big sharks', those Bakhīt and 'Adīla expose and who eventually cheat them and take their money, are corrupt but also Bakhīt and 'Adīla themselves prove easily corruptible. Like the naive and initially honourable *Ragab* character who in the films of the *Ragab*-trilogy was himself corrupted as he gravitated towards a 'rotten core', Bakhīt and 'Adīla, too, have few scruples about throwing their principles overboard. 'Adīla, who starts off as a primary school teacher at the beginning of the first film teaching her students high values and moral principles, has no moral scruples herself and takes the 'bag of money' and escapes to Cairo with Bakhīt. In many ways these films thus resemble the anti-modernism of the *Ragab* trilogy. While this lack of higher values in the films doesn't prevent the 'popular audiences' identifying with the protagonists – on the contrary, as the box-office success would indicate, they are probably relieved at not being taught a lesson – many Egyptian critics had difficulties with the couple's immorality and vulgarity. In the first *Bakhit and Adila* film, once they have money, the two indulge in excessive gourmandising, eating until they both throw up. They squander their money and, because each of them suspects that the other intends to cheat him, they readily pick fights with each other, throwing and breaking furniture and even shooting at each other.

The first two *Bakhit and Adila* films both take place in an 'anti-modernist climate' in which everything is rotten and corrupt, and where there is no enlightened voice to elevate Bakhīt and 'Adīla from corruption and vulgarity. On the contrary, the 'core' towards which they move is similar to that in the *Ragab* trilogy, thoroughly rotten. It is when they are 'back to zero', when they are centrifuged back to the edge and with the morally tarnished money all gone, that they discover that they are happy and actually do love each other after all. They can look back at the capitalist dream of becoming rich and their incursion into immorality with a smile. Safely back at the bottom of the social hierarchy, they can once again take the moral high ground. So even though these films do not include any higher

values to elevate the *ibn al-balad*, they do still operate within the same value system as the modernist films. And although they invert the element of progress and the protagonists regress into corruption, the underlying ideology of the narrative remains one of modernism. The films expose how things are not supposed to be and by pointing out the 'vices' the 'virtues' are, even if absent, implicitly understood.

The clearest statement of anti-modernism and vulgarity of the period was his 1999 film *Mahrous, the Minister's Boy*. This was 'Ādil Imām's first collaboration with Yūsuf Ma'āṭī, who was later to become his favourite scriptwriter. In this film 'Ādil Imām is a poor, ignorant fallāḥ who, through connections becomes a minister's right hand and personal adviser. He invades the minister's life, driving him crazy. The whole film is a series of sketches ridiculing the minister. Maḥrūs, like Ragab, is a naive and ignorant fallāḥ who, as he moves to the centre of corrupt political life, learns his lesson fast and eventually ousts the minister and takes over his position. In the very last scene Maḥrūs – now himself having become the minister – sits in the garden of his spacious villa surrounded by his three wives.⁶⁵ The point that Maḥrūs has not only taken the minister's position, but has become the very same type of corrupt minister as his predecessor, and that the downward spiral of political life is going to continue, is made when the actor Sa'īd Ṣāliḥ, the minister's new 'right hand', comes in and stands behind them all. From Sa'īd Ṣāliḥ's character – he was, with 'Ādil Imām, one of the main troublemakers in *The School of Troublemakers* and has appeared with 'Ādil Imām in several other films; in *Ragab on a Tin Roof* he was Bulbul, the pickpocket who cheated Ragab when he first arrived in Cairo – the audience is made to understand that the story – the corruption or inverted 'elevation' of the ignorant fallāḥ into a minister – is going to repeat itself. Sa'īd Ṣāliḥ is now *Sa'īd, the Minister's Boy*⁶⁶ and just as Maḥrūs, invaded the minister's life and took over his position, Sa'īd is going to do the same with Maḥrūs.

The film was again an enormous success at the box office. The critics, on the other hand, tended to agree that it was his worst. Several of them complained that the film had 'no positive characters' (Khayriyya al-Bishlāwī, 1999, she said the same about *Bakhit and Adila* (al-Bishlāwī, 1995)), that it was escapist (*ḥurūbī*) and that it played on people's desire to make fun of officials whom they think are in a position to tyrannise them (al-Bishlāwī, 1999); also that he utilised the easy magic formula for success of mixing the needed elements of politics, comedy and sex (Khayr Allah, 1999) to ensure his box-office success.

Conclusion

Looking at the group of films starting from the first *Bakhit and Adila* in 1995 and the last in 2000, it can seem that the ‘change of paradigm’ from the centrifugal anti-modernist films of the 1970s into renewed modernism in the first half of the 1990s, was interrupted in the second half of the 1990s. Although not all of his films from this period are anti-modernist,⁶⁷ it is the anti-modernist comedies that scored highest at the box office. To the critics’ dismay, both the first two *Bakhit and Adila* films and *Mahrous, the Minister’s Boy* all broke previous records. As a result of the renewed vulgarity of these films, the gap between audience and critical reception of ‘Ādil Imām re-emerged, and the end of the 1990s was a period in which ‘Ādil Imām was much attacked in the local press. Al-Shinnāwī claimed that ‘Ādil Imām’s “remarkable success also has led to a remarkable fear of losing his position, and that he therefore gambles on what is secure (yurāhin ‘alā-l-maḍmūn) and avoids experimentation,” adding that ‘Ādil Imām “tries to give his audience what they want, not primarily in order to please the audience, but basically to please himself, who only cares about his sales at the box office” (al-Shinnāwī, 1997). It does indeed seem plausible that ‘Ādil Imām’s return to vulgarism was guided by commercial considerations. Ādil Imām maintains that his “role is to return to pure comedy. I have understood that people with the ever-increasing pressures of life and all their financial and psychological problems are in need of such films” (cited from Sharīf Nādir, 1998). ‘Ādil Imām seems to have concluded that the audiences weren’t prepared to pay to listen to admonitions. It also seems plausible that projections of social unity and patriotism were more relevant in times when the regime was under pressure. As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, by the mid-1990s the regime had regained self-confidence, as it now definitely had the upper hand in its war against the Islamist terrorists. The regime was now sufficiently relaxed to allow the mocking of officials and the exposure of governmental corruption without necessarily incorporating it in nationalist or modernist rhetoric. Māgida Khayr Allāh suspects that ‘Ādil Imām’s films were so popular with audiences because he is “the only one enjoying relative freedom to make fun of the government (*bahdalat al-ḥukūma*),” and she claims that this is probably done in agreement with the government in order to project a picture of being democratic and ‘letting off some steam’ (Khayr Allāh, 1997). Although ‘Ādil Imām constantly claims that he is not an artist for the regime but for the people, and that his role is to be a comedian and not a politician, it seems clear that he had by then achieved a special position

vis-à-vis the regime: a position he was going to hold on to and further develop in the following years.

‘Ādil Imām – a ‘godfather’ of the nation

After a period of wavering in relation to the nationalist and modernist message of his films, and the varied reception of them by both audiences and critics, ‘Ādil Imām returned in *The Danish Experiment* (2003). This film was considered a comeback for him (Shafik, 2007, p. 91) and it re-established his position as Egypt’s number one actor after several relative failures at the box office (his 1998, 2000 and 2002 films did not reach their expected sales). All ‘Ādil Imām’s films from then on, except for *The Yacoubian Building* (2006), were scripted by Yūsuf Ma‘āṭī, and I would claim that thereafter they are all clearly nationalist and modernist again.

The new comedies scripted by Yūsuf Ma‘āṭī differ from ‘Ādil Imām’s modernist films from the early 1990s in several ways. They are lighter: there is no suffering, predicament or humiliation in them. Also the class approach and subject matter have changed. There are few references to poor people and their sufferings (as was the case in his modernist films from the early 1990s), nor is there any reference to the dream of rapid social ascent (as, for example, in the *Bakhit and Adila* trilogy). After having been criticised for playing roles considered inappropriate to both his age (youth wanting to marry in the *Bakhit and Adila* trilogy) and physicality (action hero in *A Message to the Ruler*), ‘Ādil Imām changed his screen character. From then on he played father figures, or at least adults. His characters were now usually wealthy or at least had no financial predicaments. Several of these films, beginning with *The Danish Experiment*, have also changed focus from the lower- or middle-class common man’s predicament to negotiating contemporary Egyptian youth culture.

‘Ādil Imām’s role as a father enables him to comment on youth culture and negotiate youth / parent relationships. In the *Danish Experiment* he poses as ‘godfather’ of the Egyptian patriarchal family. In *A Groom from the Security Apparatus* he is an over-protective and jealous father who rejects everyone who asks for his daughter’s hand, but in the end he is outwitted by a clever State Security officer. In *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* he is a rich, but uneducated businessman who seeks his modern-educated children’s acceptance by re-entering university.

All his films focusing on contemporary youth culture also take place in an upper- or upper-middle class environment. 'Ādil Imām has now changed his attire, and from now on mostly wears suits. In that sense it could be discussed to what extent he still embodies the predicament and wishes of the 'common man'. But although he has changed his outer clothing, he has kept several traits from his previous figures. Although he is rich now, many of the characteristics of his lower-class identity are still present in varying degrees. He is in many ways still 'simple', vulgar and uneducated, but he is also generous, kind and in many ways likable. So even though his characters are no longer from the popular neighbourhood (*al-ḥāra*), he does still embody many of their values. The 'Ādil Imām character of the 1970s had been a sympathetic, but naive and corruptible, hero who fell prey to the system, but he was also clever (*fahlawī*) and sometimes he achieved his desired social ascent while at other times he was outwitted by more powerful crooks. The 'new' 'Ādil Imām that emerged at the turn of the millennium was in many ways the very same character, only thirty years later. The simple 'common man' of the 1970s had by then achieved his social ascent – although not always by honourable means – and was now being 'outwitted' or was at least in some kind of competition with the younger generation or his own children.

An explanation of these changes in 'Ādil Imām's approach can possibly be found in certain structural changes that had taken place in the film industry in the 1990s. The condition of the old first- and second-class cinemas in central Cairo and Alexandria had been constantly deteriorating since their nationalisation in 1963. This decline in the standards of cinemas reinforced gender segregation, and audiences increasingly came to be lower-class male. The decline was reversed in the early 1990s. State-owned cinemas were leased or sold to private entrepreneurs and renovated, while at the same time an increasing number of modern first-class cinemas were built in Cairo's more affluent suburbs (Shafik, 2007, pp. 283-284). This structural change naturally led to a change in audiences. Shopping malls developed the potential for creating a new, less hostile, urban space, where women and youth could move about more easily, but they also reinforced social exclusiveness (Mona Abaza, 2001, p 108, cited from Shafik, 2007, p. 284). Thus the shopping malls seem to have facilitated a new, more gender-inclusive, but upper-middle-class youth culture that is linked to the films shown in the malls, and films designed by the producers for this particular audience are often labelled 'shopping mall films' (Shafik, 2007, p. 284).⁶⁸

Simultaneously a generational shift also took place both in the star system and in the audiences. A wave of young new comedians emerged in the late 1990s, and it seemed

that they were going to take over the show. As for 'Ādil Imām, it appears that, after an absence of over a year, he tried to adapt to these new circumstances in his film *Prince of Darkness* (2002). In this film, which was directed by his son Rāmī Imām, he collaborated with the new generation of filmmakers and actors; but although it was heavily marketed the film flopped, failing with both critics and audiences. It was with *The Danish Experiment* that he seems to have found the new formula. The formula for success in Egyptian commercial cinema is often derogatively summed up by critics as 'comedy, sex and a little bit of politics'. *The Danish Experiment* has all this, but I would say that 'Ādil Imām's 'formula' also includes a dose of Egyptian patriotism and varying degrees of pandering to the younger audiences.

The Danish Experiment was followed up by *A Groom from the Security Apparatus* (2004) and later by *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* (2007). All three films could easily be classified as shopping-mall films. They are all scripted by Yūsuf Ma'āṭī and directed by 'Alī Idrīs. I think that in these three films 'Ādil Imām has adapted to the change in the social structure of cinema audiences. Revenues are now mainly drawn from the new, modern first-class theatres. While cinema audiences in the 1970s and 1980s were increasingly lower-class male, the new audience is more gender-inclusive, younger, richer and better educated, but probably morally just as, if not more, conservative.

In the following two sections I will take a closer look at two of these films – *The Danish Experiment* and *Morgan Ahmed Morgan*. In analysing them I will show how, although they utilise very different strategies, both films present an enlightened modernist but conservative message. I have chosen these two films both because I think they are the most popular ones of the three and because they best illustrate my point.

The Danish Experiment

In *The Danish Experiment* Qadrī al-Minyāwī ('Ādil Imām) is the father of four adult sons. The opening shots of the film show Qadrī with his four sons jogging up a hill, as a harmonious family. The father and his sons are probably meant to be read as an allegory for the Egyptian nation. In his position as Youth Minister Qadrī has to receive a foreign guest, Anita Gutenberg. She is a self-declared 'sex prophet' who holds a Ph.D. in 'sexual culture', with 'sexual positions' as her special field of study. Her mission is to implement 'the Danish experiment', which here means to improve Egyptian youth's sexual awareness. When asked

about the curriculum, she says: “the first year teaches ninety positions”. And very much as a diva in a ‘sexy video clip’, she descends from the plane at the airport. Her Barbie-like appearance, blue eyes and long blonde hair seduce everyone, and like a magnet she attracts every male around her. A groom receiving his bride at the airport divorces her on the spot. All men – Egyptians, Gulf Arabs and Africans – leave their luggage and female companions and follow her. Outside the airport chaos ensues, and on the way to Qadrī’s home they are followed by an ever-growing crowd of sex-starved men.

In conservative and Islamic discourse the control of female sexuality is essential in order to ensure the integrity of society. ‘Amr Khālīd claims that “If women stand erect, society will stand erect” (*inn istaqāmat al-mar’a istaqāma al-mujtama’*). “Why?” he asks rhetorically, before he goes on and explains: “because one woman can easily entice one hundred men, but one hundred men cannot entice a single woman” (Khālīd, 1999?). It is against the background of the importance attributed to female sexuality in conservative discourses that the dominant hostility and scorn against the wave of sexy video clips has to be interpreted. The video clips thus “rub salt in a particularly sore spot” (Armbrust, 2005), and their corrupting influence on society, and particularly youth, is widely feared by conservatives. I would suggest that *The Danish Experiment* is a comment on, and a reflection of, this discourse. But the film does not adopt the discourse. It rather negotiates it. In the film the one woman not only entices a hundred men, but seemingly is a threat to a whole nation. The film’s title also points in this direction. The word *tajriba* itself is here a *double entendre* carrying the meaning of both experiment and temptation.⁶⁹ Thus the film’s title could also be read as *The Danish Temptation*. Social unrest that threatens national unity is commonly dubbed as *fitna* in Arab political discourse, but the same term in traditional Arabic literature is used to describe ‘chaos’ provoked by female sexuality (Shafik, 2007, p. 91).

At home Qadrī has his hands full trying to enforce his parental control and keep ‘temptation’ away from his sons. His sons have been raised traditionally under their father’s protection and close supervision. Their family name, al-Minyāwī, indicates that they are of southern-Egyptian descent. Their behaviour indicates that they have little experience – especially in the sexual field. They are therefore completely incapable of resisting Anita, and the ‘temptation’ therefore causes *fitna* in ‘the Egyptian House’. Before Anita’s arrival, father and sons were together in all and everything under his patriarchal leadership. After Anita’s arrival this unity breaks down, as they all compete for her favour.

Not only the sons, but also Qadrī, the father who has been widowed for over twenty years and has devoted his entire life to his sons⁷⁰, is eventually unable to resist temptation. His sons have been his destiny. He has only had sex with his wife five times: his four sons plus the wedding night, which he calls ‘the great setback’ (*al-naksa*). Eventually he manages to win Anita’s heart and intends to leave Egypt with her, forsaking his sons and duties. While he, the adult, has tried to prevent his sons, the youth, from falling for ‘temptation’ he himself falls for it. But at the very last minute, at the airport, with his sons present to bid him farewell, he realises his mistake. “I will not be able to live without those bastards (*awlād il-kalb dōl*). I love you. [But] I love Egypt,” he says. The closing scenes show Qadrī and his sons jogging up the same hill as in the opening sequence, but now with their wives and his grandchildren. The camera focuses on each of these happy families in turn, emphasising that Anita hasn’t succeeded in planting the seeds of *fitna* between father and sons after all. The unity of the Egyptian patriarchal family has been maintained and ‘Ādil Imām is the family’s godfather.

Through its message of national unity the film lands in a middle position between the two – for the effect of comedy – exaggerated positions of a morally restrictive and backward East versus an absolutely permissive and developed West. The film is therefore not first of all a comment on the perceived ‘cultural threat’ that female sexuality through, for example, video clips and satellite television, poses for Egyptian youth and the conservative discourse against this threat. The film also wishes to be understood as a cultural and political allegory on globalisation, commenting both on the East-West encounter and the North-South relationship.

The East-West encounter is highlighted through the gendering of the allegory. While the encounter with the external and internal other has usually been depicted as a male affair, signalling that the nation is to be defended by men from men, and the nation is thus indirectly coded as female, this is often reversed when the ‘other’ encountered is the ‘western other’ (Shafik, 2007, p. 90). The western ‘other’ is usually, as in this film, imagined as female, thus re-coding the Egyptian nation as male. And the encounter is presented through values. Qadrī constantly reminds Anita that “We are an eastern country. You cannot do this in Egypt.”

But the film also places Egypt together with other countries in the Third World. This is emphasised in the scenes where Anita arrives at Qadrī’s home. As mentioned above, a crowd of people has followed them from the airport. This crowd – in addition to Egyptians it

includes Gulf Arabs, Indians, South-East Asians and Africans – follows Anita and Qadrī all the way into the bedroom. Qadrī politely shows one man after another the exit. The Asians are the first to leave, reluctantly followed by the others. But a tall black southern-Sudanese-looking dude remains. He points at the blonde girl (Anita) and says that he wants to marry her for 50 cows. When Qadrī refuses, he becomes violent. I would contend that this scene not only places Egypt amongst the third world nations, but also positions the country in a hierarchy of nations constructed around race, where developing Asian and Middle Eastern nations occupy a middle position of relative development between the white European and the black African.⁷¹ The North-South dichotomy is also elaborated by the juxtaposition of ignorance and barbarism with knowledge and civilisation. Qadrī and his sons are not only traditional; they are also ‘barbarians’. They eat exaggerated amounts of food, drink from barrels and are constantly engaged in fighting and furniture smashing. Their exaggerated machismo and violence are not only a sign of masculinity, which is presented as a contrast to Anita’s feminine sexuality, but also a sign of them being uncivilised. Anita several times reproves Qadrī when he tries to keep his sons in line by yelling at them, saying: “This is not a civilised way to discuss”, before finally declaring outright: “You are a barbarian!” (*inta hamagī*). Also Qadrī constantly calls his sons mules (*baghl*) and bastards (*awlād kalb*).

I would suggest that through these different allegories the film is not only nationalist, but also projects the very essence of traditional Egyptian modernist discourse. Egypt is supposed to adopt the West’s and the developed world’s science, knowledge and technology, but not its morals. This is the trap of failed development into which Qadrī falls. As he learns from Anita, he forgets his own values and identity. But as he intends to leave the country with her, the sight of his sons at the airport reminds him of his true identity and duties. He takes the only correct modernist decision: he combines ‘western technology’ (i.e. the things he learned from Anita) and ‘oriental values’, and returns to his country and sons, thus contributing to their (his family’s and, as an allegory, his country’s) development. This is shown in the last scene, in which the extended family – now with wives and grandchildren – is seen harmoniously jogging together up the hill again.

Morgan Ahmed Morgan

Murgān Aḥmad Murgān (ʿĀdil Imām) is a rich and powerful businessman who believes that everything can be bought for money and that everyone can be bribed. For him, corruption

is no longer a necessity, but an art – an art he has mastered. But his son ‘Uday (Sharīf Salāma) and daughter ‘Alyā’⁷² (Basma) are of a different opinion. They are students at a private university and are under the influence of Dr. Jihān Murād, the modern, enlightened and incorruptible teacher of ‘civilisation and civilising studies’ (*‘ilm al-ḥaḍāra wa-l-taḥaḍḍur*). They are not only embarrassed by their father’s uncivilised and vulgar ways, but also feel humiliated and ashamed when the press accuses their father of being corrupt. In order to gain his children’s respect and win Dr. Jihān’s heart – he falls in love with her at first sight – Murgān tries to ingratiate himself with them by proving that he is cultured and able to take a university degree.

Several critics (examples are Khayr Allāh, 2007 and Munā al-Ghāzī, 2007) have connected this film with the shifting status of education in Egypt as represented by ‘Ādil Imām’s characters Disūqī Affandī and Bahgat al-Abāṣīrī. Here, Disūqī Affandī represents the high esteem in which education was held in Egypt under ‘Abd al-Nāṣir, while Bahgat al-Abāṣīrī – who in *The School of Troublemakers* argued that “learning cannot be measured in aubergines” (*al-‘ilm lā yukayyal bi-l-bittingān*)⁷³ – becomes a symbol for the rapid deterioration of the status of education in the following decades. Al-Ghāzī (2007) therefore claims that Murgān Aḥmad Murgān represents an attempt to revive Disūqī Affandī’s ‘country for the holders of certificates’, while Khayr Allāh (2007) sees Murgān Aḥmad Murgān as the very same Bahgat al-Abāṣīrī only thirty years later – he has now become a successful businessman, but he has not received any education to speak of and is just as vulgar and ignorant as before. Translating this into the terminology of modernism and anti-modernism, Murgān Aḥmad Murgān would represent a return to the modernism that dominated before *The School of Troublemakers*.

The film is a comment on contemporary Egyptian society and utilises the traditional ‘realist-reformist paradigm’ of ‘exposing the manners and customs’, by pointing out vices and virtues. ‘Ādil Imām confirmed this view when he explained that *Morgan Ahmed Morgan*⁷⁴, although a comedy, would comment on positive and negative phenomena in society (cited from Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh, 2007). It is mainly two different phenomena that are being dealt with. One is the role of businessmen in society and politics, the other contemporary Egyptian youth culture.

When Murgān Aḥmad Murgān – the rich but vulgar businessman whom several critics have compared with Bahgat al-Abāṣīrī from *The School of Troublemakers* – (re-)enters university and is squeezed through the modern education system in order to be reformed

and elevated into a responsible modern, educated man, he has to navigate between two contradictory 'extremes' of contemporary youth culture. Murgān 'falls' into both 'extremes' and exposes them as deviations. To win Dr. Jihān's heart there is only one way for him: by serious study, with no cheating or bribery. Thus the rich but still vulgar businessman is transformed by the university, 'the modernist institution', without being absorbed into the two contradictory deviations of contemporary Egyptian youth culture.

Youth are in official discourse sometimes accused of being radical Islamists, while at other times, paradoxically, the same youth are deemed easily susceptible to the corrupting influences of Western culture. The juxtaposition of these two contradictory accusations reflects the rise of two phenomena in popular youth culture in Egypt: that of the lay preacher 'Amr Khālid and that of the sexualised Arabic music video clips (Hossam Bahgat / Wesal Afifi, 2007, p. 70).

Morgan Ahmed Morgan reflects this official discourse. When Murgān enrolls at university it is to discover that the naughtiness of the youth of the early 1970s in *The School of Troublemakers* was nothing compared to the youth of the third millennium. The students are split between exaggerated emancipation and recklessness on the one side and a group of strict Islamists on the other. Each of these two 'extremes', or deviations, is connected in the film with their respective 'phenomena' – the spoiled reckless westernised youth with the video-clips and the Islamists, with 'the new lay preachers' (*al-du'āh al-gudud*).

The 'westernised youth' are represented by several caricatures of spoiled and reckless youth. One of these is Haytham Dabbūr. He speaks in a slang which is a mixture of English and Arabic, and functions as a caricature of the alleged careless attitude of contemporary youth, an attitude which is not very unlike that of the *troublemakers* thirty years earlier; and it may be because of these similarities that Murgān is attracted to them. Turning usual parent / youth relationships upside down, Murgān tells his son and daughter that he is going to study with a friend of his (the usual, and in many families the only, acceptable excuse for being out in the evening), only to go out and party with his new friends. In the discothèque they take drugs. Back in class the next morning Murgān is hardly able to keep his eyes open. In his imagination the teacher, Dr. Jihān, turns into the Lebanese sex-pot Hayfā' Wabhī singing her infamous *būs al-wāwā* [*kiss the owie*], turning the scene into a comment on the dangerous lures that these sexual video clips supposedly represent. Again as in *The Danish Experiment* it is the father 'Ādil Imām who, with his

traditional background, turns out to be most easily susceptible to the corrupting influence of contemporary youth culture.

In the film spoiled westernised youth and Islamist-oriented youth are connected to each other by showing that they both challenge patriarchy and practise deviant sexual morals. Egyptian society does not permit sex for unmarried youth, and especially for girls such relationships remain a taboo. The film equates the westernised youths' boy-girlfriend relationships, in the film termed *antama*,⁷⁵ with the Islamists' alleged practice of 'urfī-marriages.⁷⁶ Already on his first day in class Murgān discovers that his daughter 'Ālyā is *mi'antima* (i.e. is the girlfriend of) with a spoiled and not very masculine-looking boy. When he sees them flirting with each other in class he is furious. To the Islamist students' loud acclaim and the spoiled westernised students' horror Murgān, who with his traditional values is unable to accept that his daughter has a boyfriend, attacks the boy and gives him a beating. "This is the *clash of civilisations*," one of the students comments. To Murgān's surprise he learns that the university sanctions such relationships and that he has to apologise for having 'hurt the boy's feelings'. Here Murgān's traditional masculinity and '*ibn al-balad*' code of honour are contrasted with some of these westernised and spoiled youths' lack of honour. Rather than hitting back, the boy complains to the university administration that his feelings have been hurt, and when Murgān asks him, "What would you do if you found out that your mother was my girlfriend?" he says "that he wouldn't mind, but Ma already has a boyfriend." Horrified, Murgān exclaims that "this is no university. This is a nightclub."

When Murgān attacked the boy in class, he had appealed to the Islamic feeling of morality, adopting or imitating an Islamist style of rhetoric and shouting: "Verily, they are inviting to a hostile belief and encouraging sinful and vicious acts" (*innahum yad'ūna ilā daynin*⁷⁷ *ladīd yaḥuththu 'alā al-fujr wa-l-radhlā wa-l-fisq*) and "Verily, this is the trial, Brother Maḥmūd" (*innaha al-fitna yā akh Maḥmūd*). He is now invited to join the university's Islamist group, The Family of the Light of Truth (*Usrat Nūr al-Ḥaqq*), in order to form a front against dissolution (*inḥilāl*) and laxity (*tasayyub*). On the surface his traditional values seem more in accordance with those of the Islamists, but he is soon to learn that these Islamist youth practise a similar kind of *antama* and thus constitute the very same challenge to traditional patriarchy. "What about morals?" (*al-akhhlāq*) Murgān asks. "You see how the girls at university are doing – blouses are on their way up and trousers down." "There is no solution but marriage" (*lā ḥalla siwā al-zawāg*) Maḥmūd, the Islamist leader, explains.

“Marriage protects the boy and girl from falling into disobedience” (*al-zawāj yaṣūn al-fata wa-l-fatāh min al-wuqū‘ fī l-ma‘ṣiya*). In Egypt it is widely feared that what is addressed as the ‘marriage crisis’ (*azmat al-zawāg*), i.e. delayed age of marriage, causes sexual frustration which ultimately threatens to break down the social structure of society. Murgān, reflecting traditional patriarchal control, asks, “But how can they marry while they are students and still dependent on their parents?”, to which Maḥmūd explains that “marriage in secret is much better than public abomination” (*al-qabīḥa fī l-‘alan*). The Islamist students marry secretly (*urfi*-marriages), behind their parents’ backs, with an Islamic blessing, prompting Murgān to exclaim: “So you are practising boyfriend-girlfriend relationships (*mi’antimīn*) too. What’s the difference?” Both ‘extremes’ of contemporary youth culture thus practise the same moral deviation of ‘free’ boyfriend-girlfriend relationships that threaten traditional patriarchal values.

A closer look at the Islamists in *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* will show that they differ from those presented in earlier films by ‘Ādil Imām in several ways. The Islamist leader Shaykh Maḥmūd has no beard, and unlike the ‘terrorists’, he is not dressed in a white *salafī-jallābiyya*. His style resembles more that of the ‘new preachers’ (*al-du‘āh al-judud*). Like ‘Amr Khālīd, he wears jeans and a shirt, and when he speaks – often, unlike ‘Amr Khālīd, in classical Arabic – he always smiles. So while these ‘new’ fundamentalists’ style is different, criticism of them displays several similarities with the way they are portrayed in other ‘Ādil Imām films. It is again their alleged hypocrisy which is the focus. The new fundamentalists’ focus is on personal piety and bodily modesty. The film’s fundamentalist character, Shaykh Maḥmūd, explicitly makes the point in a scene in which he criticises Dr. Jihān for being improperly dressed. This focus on piety is undermined in the film by the Islamists’ alleged hypocrisy in practising indecency under the cover of religion in the form of *urfi*-marriages. When the university’s Islamist newspaper attacks Murgān for having bribed his way to the prize for the university’s best actor, Murgān easily manages to bribe Shaykh Maḥmūd, and the next day he preaches that: “We shouldn’t let our malice incite us against those enjoying success”. This is reminiscent of ‘Amr Khālīd, whose message Asef Bayat (2003) claims has become so popular among the rich and affluent because it assures them “that religious worship and piety can fit with modern lifestyles and [...] allowed the Egyptian rich [to] feel good about their fortunes.” ‘Ādil Imām has criticised these new lay preachers on several occasions, both because of their lack of credibility as a result of not having the required religious schooling (Wahbī Zāhī, 2003) and because of the large amounts of money that the

da'wa brings them. He joked that if he were to quit acting he would perhaps start as a preacher, adding that: "once you earn money from religion it is over [with your credibility]" (cited from 'Amr al-Laythī, 2009).

By putting up these two irreconcilable extremes – Islamic fundamentalists and spoiled and reckless westernised youth – in themselves a picture of the schizophrenic cultural state of contemporary Egypt, torn between westernisation and islamisation, characterising both as deviations, he is able to carve out a modernist middle position represented in his Egyptian identity elevated through the 'modernisation' efforts of Dr. Jīhān.

Murgān's 'vices' are that he is uneducated and vulgar and that he uses bribery to achieve his aims. In an endeavour to ingratiate himself with Dr. Jīhān and his children, he publishes a collection of poetry (he has, of course, bought these nonsense poems from a street poet) and wins a national literary prize through bribery, and, again through bribes, he obtains a place at university. There he not only bribes his way through all the exams but, by bribing the other teams and the judges, he and his new friends win the university's football championship and, although he is unable to memorise a single line,⁷⁸ he even wins the award for best actor at the university theatre. Everybody is bribable. He even tries to bribe God himself. He kneels down to pray and orders his assistant to distribute blankets to the poor and send some twenty employees on a pilgrimage. Only Dr. Jīhān refuses to take a bribe. She claims that she is the last of all Egypt's 72 million who would be willing to accept a bribe, whereupon Murgān self-confidently informs her: "Don't worry I have already bribed the rest of the 72 million. There's only you left." But having bribed all the professors, he still has to pass Dr. Jīhān's exam. Failing both to buy the exam and to cheat, he has no choice but to sit down and study. The film ends with the graduation ceremony three years later. The students, including Murgān, all get their diplomas. Through hard work they have been transformed into educated and responsible citizens and Murgān wins Dr. Jīhān's heart.

While the film thus carries the message that not everything can be bought for money – in the end Murgān achieves his university certificate and wins Dr. Jīhān's heart through sheer hard and honest work – the film also represents a normalisation of corruption. While corruption and negligence were confronted in his films from the early 1990s, it has become the normal state of things in *Morgan Ahmed Morgan*.⁷⁹ People are not suffering under corruption. On the contrary, it seems that everybody is just waiting for his chance to be bribed. It is just everywhere and people seem to have adapted to it and

accepted it. It is only Dr. Jihān who resists, and Murgān tries to bring her down to earth by explaining that “I am not corrupt; on the contrary, I care about people. Here [at university] you don’t care about anything. The government employee who earns between three and four hundred pounds a month, how is he going to live? Food, drink, healthcare, schooling and a lot of other things – from where is he going to pay all that? He either has to steal, beg or kill himself. And the government knows this very well. Don’t tell me the government is giving him this small salary not knowing from where he is going to eat.” The film can thus give the impression that corruption is no longer a pure evil threatening the nation but has rather become the natural state of things. Could it be that these films, by adapting to new socio-political realities in Egypt, represent an attempt to come to terms with the infitāhī business class of the 1970s and integrate it into the national mould? Al-Ghāzī (2007) asks whether “this film is an attempt to legitimise business people’s presence in politics, to show that the business class, with its wealth, is able to solve [the country’s] problems?” The film ends with Murgān marrying Dr. Jihān. Business marries education/culture or culture gives business its needed legitimacy. While, through culture and western education, Egyptian modernism elevated the common Egyptian ‘*ibn al-balad*’, here it elevates the new rich: the class of ‘common men’ who have achieved their social ascent in the decades when modernism was absent. The film could thus reflect the regime’s increasing reliance on the private sector to implement government policy and the new government’s appointment of businessmen to the cabinet.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that the films scripted by Yūsuf Ma‘āṭī represent a more permanent return to the dominant ideology of Egyptian modernism. Although *The Danish Experiment* and *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* differ from the films scripted by Waḥīd Ḥāmid in the early 1990s, they are both modernist, and *The Danish Experiment* is also explicitly nationalist. If it is true that the regime resorted to a strategic use of nationalism in the face of the ‘Islamist threat’ in the early 1990s and that this was reflected in ‘Ādil Imām’s films, it is not unlikely that at the turn of the millennium the regime was again in need of support. The US-led ‘War on Terrorism’ and western focus on the lack of democracy in the Middle East contributed toward putting the regime’s growing crisis of legitimacy in the forefront. The ‘Islamist threat’ had enabled the regime to postpone promised reforms, but this situation became

increasingly difficult to maintain, and, starting from the turn of the millennium, the regime had to face increasing pressure both from internal and external forces to go ahead with its promised democratic reforms.

Politics the official way

Al-Shinnāwī (2005) points out that ‘Ādil Imām could easily combine his role as a spokesperson of ‘the government’ while at the same time representing ‘the man in the street’ – and I would add the ‘cultural elite’ – when confronting terrorism. Terrorism was ‘the useful enemy’ – an enemy everybody agreed was a threat. According to al-Shinnāwī, terrorism was the main concern of all ‘Ādil Imām’s films in the first half of the 1990s. Although not everybody agreed upon the reasons behind this terrorism and the exact definition of the phenomena, terrorism was an area of congruence on which the cultural elite, the state and supposedly also the people agreed.

But how are political topics dealt with by ‘Ādil Imām where there seems to be no such congruence? How is he able to speak on behalf of both the government *and* the people in films dealing with topics in which the regime’s policy apparently runs counter to the majority’s will? In this chapter I will concentrate on the film *The Embassy is in the Building* (2005). This political satire takes the controversy of normalisation (of Egypt’s relations with Israel) – in Arabic known as *taṭbīʿ* – as its subject. But in representing the various shades of opinion on the subject to be found in Egypt the film moves beyond the issue of normalisation, and becomes a portrait of contemporary politics in Egypt. In the following chapter I will first show how this film supports and legitimises the official government policy on the issue of ‘normalisation’. I will show how the film utilises patriotism and necessity (i.e. there is no other viable choice) to legitimise this official position, which at first seems to contradict the position of the ‘people’. Thereafter I will look at how this film legitimises the regime not only in regard to its position vis-à-vis Israel, but also in its conflict with the internal political opposition. I will conclude the chapter by looking at some of the political views that ‘Ādil Imām has recently expressed in public and how he has increasingly come to represent and support the regime on crucial issues.

Egypt's relations with Israel are of a complex nature. On the one hand Egypt had a peace agreement with Israel since 1979. This agreement not only stipulated an end of aggression and the establishment of diplomatic relations but, on Israel's insistence, also the 'normalisation' of economic and cultural relations. This contractual peace is, however, rejected by the vast majority of Egyptian society, largely due to continuation of Israeli aggression in Palestine. The government, on the other hand, is officially committed to normalisation, and also encourages it in some areas, but partly due to public opinion and partly to the political tension that often arises between the two states, it is reluctant to give its full endorsement to normalisation (Iman Hamdy, 2006, p. 7).⁸⁰

The Embassy is in the Building was not the first time that 'Ādil Imām had aroused controversy with his views about peace with Israel. Very much like the regime's own position, 'Ādil Imām has been ambiguous on the issue, and made contrary statements. In 1996 he was invited to speak as guest of honour at the Cairo International Book Fair. He spoke about normalisation and the need to deal with 'reality'. By the nationalist press his statements were interpreted as a willingness to go to Israel, and he was severely criticised. 'Ādil Imām was forced to respond and clarify his position, and he claimed that he had been misquoted,⁸¹ and again he used patriotism to back up his view: "I will not agree to visit Israel. Only in one case would I do so: if my country's interests so demand. I am prepared to do anything that serves the people (*al-nās*) and the country (*al-balad*)," before he goes on to describe refusal to deal with 'reality' as 'convulsiveness' (*tashannuj*) (cited from Sa'd, 1996).

It seems that there were cracks in the 'anti-normalisation' position at the time. In 1998 some prominent intellectuals in Cairo established the Cairo Peace Society.⁸² Amongst the founders was Luṭfī al-Khūlī, who had been a staunch opponent of al-Sādāt's peace initiative at the time. That same year al-Khūlī (1998) wrote a series of eulogies for 'Ādil Imām in *al-Ahrām*, and because this was a period when 'Ādil Imām was much attacked in the press, these eulogies were interpreted by some as an attempt by these intellectuals to bring 'Ādil Imām into the normalisation camp (N. N., 2008b).⁸³

The Ministry of Culture has refused to push for cultural normalisation. Positioning itself as a protector of the cultural field, it claims that 'cultural normalisation' is a decision that should be left to society and the professional syndicates. As society is naturally against such normalisation, the Ministry can thus give its position a democratic aura. While there

have been few signs of normalisation in the cultural field, other fields have recently seen some movement towards normalisation. After relations had been strained to the limit since the outbreak of the intifāḍa in September 2000 there were several indications that in 2004 things were on the move again: Israel was on its way to pulling out of Gaza and Egypt had accepted a role in guarding the border. In December 2004 Egypt had signed a so-called QIZ-agreement.⁸⁴ The same year also saw the release of ‘Azzām ‘Azzām⁸⁵ and an agreement about exporting Egyptian natural gas to Israel was signed. But against the background of a still ongoing intifāḍa, with continuous Israeli aggression and a virtual standstill in the peace process, these developments were no more popular in 2004 than they would have been before. It is against the background of this increasing polarisation between a de facto normalisation with Israel in several fields and a public opinion that totally refuses any contact with Israel, that the film *The Embassy is in the Building* came to reconcile the poles into a shared position of ‘cold peace’. Morality and patriotism are utilised to carve out this middle position as the only responsible and viable policy that serves Egypt’s interests.

The Embassy is in the Building

In the film Sharīf Khayrī (i.e. the good, honourable) (‘Ādil Imām), a model of the apolitical Egyptian, is an oil engineer who has been away from Egypt for over twenty years, working in Dubai. Dubai seems to have been chosen in order to increase the feeling of being removed from all political currents. His character is drawn up in these first parts of the film, which take place abroad. He is so absorbed in the trivial concerns of life that he has never heard of Kofi Annan and does not know what a UN resolution is. He is a womaniser, and when his affair with his boss’s wife is exposed, he is expelled and has to return to Egypt. The comedy in the film is derived from placing this person in the political context of contemporary Cairo. Upon his return he learns that his new neighbour is the Israeli Embassy. The security measures to protect the embassy make life impossible. He can no longer come and go as he pleases, bags have to be searched and visitors, including his girlfriends, must have advance permits and register with their passports.

Throughout the film different positions on Egypt’s relations with Israel are presented. ‘Ādil Imām (cited from Ḥamdī Basīṭ, 2005) as usual announced that the film was going to present the popular (*al-sha‘bī*) and not the government’s view on the issue, reiterating that he is an artist for the people and not for the regime. Thus the popular

refusal of any contact with Israel naturally makes itself felt everywhere in the film. A few examples are the taxi driver who takes Sharīf from the airport to the building where the embassy is. Thinking Sharīf is a traitor working for the embassy, he criticises him, saying: “May our Lord guide you on the right path” (*rabbina yihdīk*). When Sharīf wants to order a home delivery the local *fiṭīr*-seller refuses to deliver to his address; and when Sharīf despairs and tries to sell his flat, the estate agent refuses even to try. “The flat is worthless as long as it is next to the embassy,” he says. Even the prostitute, when she finds out that Sharīf lives next to the embassy, calls him a traitor and refuses to take any money. Sharīf himself, when he learns about the embassy’s presence in his building, is initially shocked and takes the same stand on a purely emotional ground, but having the Israelis next door means that he, like Egypt, has to adapt to this new reality. Sharīf, who represents the ‘common apolitical Egyptian’, can thus also be read as an allegory for Egypt itself.

The government’s position is presented through the officers responsible for the security of the embassy. Rāshid Bēh, the officer responsible for both the embassy’s and Sharīf’s security, explains to him that Egypt has “a peace agreement with those people [i.e. the Israelis], so we [i.e. Egypt] have diplomatic relations with them. This is the policy of the country you live in, and you have to adapt to reality. Although some people, or maybe even most people, are of a different opinion, this is the state’s ‘higher interests’ (*maṣāliḥ al-dawla al-‘ulyā*), and you wouldn’t like to be against the state’s ‘higher interests’, would you?” When Sharīf objects and demands that also his ‘lower interests’ (*maṣāliḥī anā al-suflā*) should be taken care of, he goes on to explain that “You don’t need to give them a hug when you see them [...]. Just mind your own business. Live your life and adapt to circumstances, and if you need anything I will be there for you.” The regime is thus not friends with Israel but is adapting to circumstances and reality and wants the people to do so too. The security officers are therefore at Sharīf’s service and trying to minimise the inconveniences he suffers from having the embassy next door. So when he comes home, he not only finds a banquet ready and waiting for him, but also the *fiṭīr*-seller who had initially refused to deliver to his address calls him up again and says he is at his service. Sharīf has only to call the officer to be assured of whatever he wants (even hashish!) and after terrorists (probably Islamists) targeting the embassy blow up his flat with a rocket, the regime restores the flat to its former state over night.⁸⁶ The government is thus presented as being all-powerful and all-knowing.

Between government and people there are several other ‘players’. Sharīf, of course, understands nothing of this and is simply tossed from one position to another. Illustrative of his ignorance and confusion is a scene in which, one evening, he sits with his friends smoking hashish. On TV a debate on the *al-Jazīra* channel about normalisation attracts their attention. First Muṣṭafā Bakrī⁸⁷ appears on the screen agitating against normalisation, whereupon Sharīf responds: “By God, what he says is really great” (*wallāhi il-rāgil da biyitkallim kalām zayy il-full*). When his counterpart, ‘Alī Sālim,⁸⁸ comes on the screen arguing in favour of the opposite position, Sharīf acclaims his views in the same way; and when, bored with politics, they switch channels and the ‘vulgar’ video clip *Put the dots on the letters* [*huṭṭ al-nuqaṭ ‘ala al-ḥurūf*], by Būsī Samīr,⁸⁹ appears, they all similarly acclaim what she has to say.

But gradually Sharīf becomes involved in the anti-normalisation movement. When he sees an anti-normalisation demonstration being led by a beautiful girl, Dāliyā Shuhdī from the ‘progressive left’, he spontaneously joins in, not for the sake of the cause but because of her, for him just another beauty he intends to add to his collection of girlfriends. She thinks she has found a new comrade in the cause against normalisation (*taṭbīr*) while he, misinterpreting the terminology, thinks they are speaking about dating (*taḏbīr*).

The rudimentary and stereotypical representation of Dāliyā Shuhdī and her family, who in the film represent the anti-normalisation leftist opposition, was perceived as offensive by many who identified with the political and intellectual left. The family and the leftist opposition are represented in the film as being out of touch with reality, believing in hollow slogans and speaking in an ideological and incomprehensible language. They are connected with communist symbols.⁹⁰ Morally they are liberal – a common prejudice against communists – and they are represented as being overly fond of alcohol.⁹¹ The leftist family also lacks traditional Egyptian family values. To Sharīf’s surprise, the family takes Dāliyā’s arrest by Central Security with considerable calm; any ‘normal’ Egyptian family would have been hysterical had their daughter been arrested. But Dāliyā has been raised to be ‘independent’, so there is no need to worry for her. In fact, both she and her brother, because their parents have spent most of their time in prison, have been raised by their maiden-aunt turned-comrade – yet another impossibility in a society like the Egyptian, with its rigid class hierarchy. Presumably as a result of having been brought up in this bohemian atmosphere, Dāliyā’s brother seems neither to know nor to care about basic Egyptian manners. When Sharīf visits the family, he remains seated with his nose in a book and with

the sole of his shoe in Sharīf's face. When Sharīf asks him what he is reading, he responds: *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez.⁹² The title, together with the foot in Sharīf's face – a grave insult – makes Sharīf feel disgusted.

In fact it was the film's disrespect for 'cultural symbols' that most offended the 'intellectuals'. Several intellectuals, among them Şun' Allāh Ibrāhīm, signed a declaration in which they demanded an apology from 'Ādil Imām for insulting them, claiming that the film makes more fun of them than of Israel. They accused this supposedly anti-normalisation film of supporting normalisation, and called it 'an unjustified insult' of cultural symbols and intellectuals generally (N. N., 2005b). It was especially 'Ādil Imām's lampooning of Amal Dunqul's anti-normalisation poem known as *Make no conciliation* (*lā tuṣāliḥ*) that offended the intellectuals. The poem, which was written in 1976, i.e. before al-Sādāt made peace with Israel in 1979, has become a symbol for rejectionists and leftist intellectuals in general. In a scene in which Sharīf sits with his friends smoking hashish, he recites this highly esteemed poem but turns it into the gobbledegook of a stoned hashish smoker altering the 'two jewels' (*jawharatayni*) which in the original poem were meant to symbolise the eyes of the martyr, into 'two pipefulls of hashish' (*ḥagarayni*).⁹³ It is not surprising that secular intellectuals, probably many of the same who praised 'Ādil Imām in the early 1990s for his position as a defender of freedom and tolerance against the 'birds of darkness', were unable to accept it or treat it humorously when it was their own, and not the fundamentalists', symbols that were being made fun of.

The film not only presents different stereotypes of the pro- and anti-normalisation camps but the narrative also takes the audience through several successive stages of development. When his friend the lawyer decides to take Sharīf's case to court and demands that the embassy be expelled, the apolitical Sharīf turns into a popular hero overnight – a hero of steadfastness (*baṭal al-ṣumūd*), representing the people's stand against normalisation. He joins anti-normalisation rallies, but when he has to speak, he finds nothing better to say than to sing like a parrot Sha'bān 'Abd al-Raḥīm's *I Hate Israel* [*ana bakrah Isrā'īl*]⁹⁴, which he had heard on the radio.⁹⁵

But this honeymoon between people and opposition through Sharīf is not to last long. The 'empty slogans' and the disturbances are in conflict with both the interests of the state and also Israel, and it is the Israeli embassy that consequently sets a trap for him. They arrange for him to be filmed in bed with a prostitute, and then blackmail him into dropping all charges against the embassy. Just as he had become a popular hero overnight, Sharīf now

becomes a traitor. Abandoned by everyone, Sharīf is contacted by an old friend, Walā' Ghānim. Even though this friend is from a poor background – Sharīf says he used to be “a smelly and despicable vagabond” (*da inta kunt garbū' wi mu'affin*) – he has become a wealthy businessman, according to himself because he has put aside all conscientious objections. “I did business and put aside (*shilt min dimāghī*) all that nonsense, which never brings anything” (*il-kalām illi la yiqaddim walla yi'akhhkar*). When they enter the dining room it becomes clear what ‘conscientious objections’ he has put aside to become rich, as the Israeli ambassador is waiting for them there. Walā' Ghānim is dealing with the Israelis in a so-called joint venture, bringing in Israeli experts and capital to develop agricultural production. This form of normalisation is refuted by Sharīf. First morally, when he exclaims: “Now I see why fruit neither smells nor tastes of anything anymore” – what is stained by illicit money has a bitter taste – and then on nationalist grounds when he says that “for seven thousand years we have been cultivating our land and now you [i.e. the opportunistic businessmen] bring in them [i.e. the Israelis] to cultivate it for us!”

The film thus rebuts both the two extremes of pro- and anti-normalisation. The pro-nationalisation camp is portrayed as unpatriotic and opportunistic while the anti-normalisation leftist opposition is mocked as out of touch with reality and convulsive. The Islamists, on the other hand, are irrelevant; they are intruders coming from outside, trying to hijack the cause. Having exposed the different political forces in Egypt as deviations, the film prepares for reconciliation and projection of the straight and patriotic middle road.

Sharīf has by now gone through three successive stages of development. The first stage is one of political unconsciousness. This is followed by a ‘false awakening’, in which he becomes a popular hero driven purely by emotion and hollow slogans. In the third stage Sharīf is ostracised and labelled a traitor, although in his heart he is still a true nationalist. The chronology of these stages corresponds to the changing regimes that have ruled Egypt. I therefore feel tempted to suggest that – since Sharīf in many ways represents Egypt – these stages could be interpreted as corresponding roughly with Egypt’s own development towards ‘political maturity’. The first stage could be seen as representing the monarchy: unconsciousness, womanising and being totally preoccupied with the small pleasures of life. The second stage would then be ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s regime: emotional nationalism and hollow slogans. The third stage would thus represent the al-Sādāt era: circumstances force Egypt to make peace, and as a result – according to her own version – she is unjustly labelled as a

traitor and expelled from the Arab League, just as Sharīf in the film unjustly becomes a pariah.

If this interpretation is accepted, the final scenes of the film would represent a fourth stage: the Mubārak era and the middle position between the two previous stages/positions – the anti-normalisation position (the leftists) and pro-normalisation (business). Here Sharīf or Egypt is again reconnected with the Palestinian cause. For Sharīf's sake this connection had been implicit from the beginning of the film in Sharīf's Palestinian friend in Dubai – the child Iyād, whose dream had been to return to Palestine to take part in the Intifāḍa. Iyād is now employed to bring forth the final awakening in a highly symbolic scene, paving the way to reconciliation of the Egyptian nation.

The ambassador, who is holding a reception, asks Sharīf to open his flat (read: his land) for him because the number of guests is more than expected. When Sharīf refuses, the ambassador hints at the compromising videotape on which they have recorded Sharīf in bed with a prostitute. Forced to give in, Sharīf finds his flat slowly being flooded with guests until there is no longer room for him. This scene could be taken as an allegory both of Palestine which is invaded by Jewish immigrants or settlers and of Egypt. The guests would in the latter case represent Israeli business 'invading' Egypt and threaten local business. Regardless of whether Sharīf here represents Egypt or Palestine, he is still squeezed out and compelled to leave. The embassy's private guards open the exit door, and once he is outside, turn their backs on him, shutting him out as if they had been waiting for him to leave. Like a refugee – downtrodden and humiliated – he has to accept the shame and descend the stairs in silence. But when he reaches 'the bottom' (both of the physical stairs and, allegorically, of humiliation), the final awakening (the intifāḍa) takes place. The security guards on the ground floor are absorbed in watching the funeral of yet another martyr on television. As the funeral procession draws closer, Sharīf recognises the picture of the young martyr covered in Palestinian flags. "Noo!" he screams "It's Iyād! It's my friend, Iyād! He is a hero!" Beside himself with anger, Sharīf runs back up the stairs. He forces his way through the guards blocking the entrance and throws the 'guests' (the Israeli occupiers) out of his flat, shouting: "Out! All of you get out of here!" (Note here that he only threw them out of his flat and not out of the neighbouring embassy. I interpret this as clear support for a two-state solution).

Honour having thus been re-established, Sharīf again demonstrates against normalisation, first alone, but gradually, like small streams flowing into a large river, other

demonstrators gather around him⁹⁶, and finally also Dāliyā rejoins him. This time the slogans are not hollow. Sharīf has himself seen (on TV) and experienced (in his flat) what Israel is about. His consciousness is now based on *ilm* (knowledge). The slogans have been carefully chosen and are of a kind everybody can agree with: “Down with the Israeli occupation,” “Down with the enemies of Peace” (there are enemies of peace in both camps), and “Down with child murderers” (although it was the Israelis who murdered the child [i.e. Iyād], also child murderers are to be found in both camps). And when the demonstration is confronted by the riot police, the popular hero ‘Ādil Imām alone steps forward, only to be felled by the police. But the officer Ṭāriq Zakī, who had previously been guarding the entrance of the building housing Sharīf and the embassy, and who is now an officer in the riot police (in an earlier scene, when taking farewell with Sharīf, he had said to him – or was it to ‘Ādil Imām this time? – that “if everybody would have loved their country like you do, we would be the best country in the world”) intervenes and orders his soldiers to make way for the demonstration. The demonstration thereafter goes on, with all parts of the nation united. The state, represented by Ṭāriq Zakī, smilingly waves to the demonstrators and gives them its blessing. Sharīf and Dāliyā stand side by side in the front, with the people behind them; and the Islamists are, of course, not present.

Even though ‘Ādil Imām and the scriptwriter Yūsuf Ma‘āṭī claim otherwise, the film fits neatly into the official position on normalisation. Yūsuf Ma‘āṭī (cited from Ḥusām Ḥāfiẓ, 2005) claimed that “the film cannot possibly represent the official point of view. While the government signs the QIZ agreement and exports natural gas to Israel, the film rejects normalisation.” This seems to understate the regime’s ambiguous position on normalisation outlined above. Moreover, the regime is presented as the responsible part and acting for the good of the nation. The film explains the regime’s position of ‘cold peace’ in terms of necessity and morally justifies it as being in the interest of the nation. At the same time the film rejects any ‘warm peace’ as long as the Palestinian issue remains unresolved. This is made clear through the anti-normalisation stand at the end of the film and the fact that the ‘awakening’ is linked to the killing of Iyād. The leftists and nationalists, who reject relations with Israel, are represented as ‘hotheads’. They are sincere in their resistance, but in a situation like this ‘mind’ has to take precedence over ‘heart’, and ‘mind’ is represented by the regime. The opposition, which has ‘heart’, as its deepfelt resistance indicates, is in need of guidance (i.e. to be taken back in under the regime’s wing). The Islamist opposition, here again represented as terrorists, is naturally not part of this. The Islamists are only

disrupting intruders who have nothing to contribute. The position of the pro-normalisation camp – here represented by the rich businessman – is refuted on the basis that it is immoral and unpatriotic. The regime represents the ‘middle road’ between ‘hotheads’ and ‘traitors’, and it is thus the regime that represents the nation, is truly patriotic in the sense that it acts for the best of the nation and is the holder of truth and morality.

Has ‘Ādil Imām become a spokesman of the regime?

The film’s release in the summer of 2005 coincided with a period of political turmoil and calls for reform in Egypt. In May 2005 the people were asked to vote on constitutional changes designed to pave the way for multi-candidate presidential elections. These elections were to be held in September 2005 and to be followed by parliamentary elections in three rounds in November and December of the same year. The film team naturally denied that the film should have anything to do with the internal political situation. Yūsuf Ma‘āṭī claimed that he had had the script ready long before anyone had any idea that the constitution was to be changed and before anyone had even heard of the Kifāyā movement (cited from al-Asyūṭī, 2005).

The protest movement known under the name Kifāyā (Enough) first came to public notice in the summer of 2004, and gained momentum throughout 2005. It was a grassroots coalition drawing support from across Egypt’s political spectrum to oppose Mubārak’s presidency and the possibility that he might seek to transfer power to his son Gamāl. The movement’s origins can be found in earlier strands of political protest, especially pro-Intifāda demonstrations in 2000 and the protests against the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

Protests, and increasing domestic and international pressure on Egypt for reforms, may in turn have aroused a need for the support of public figures like ‘Ādil Imām, and this time not only against the Islamic threat, but on a whole range of issues. At a press conference during the filming of *The Embassy is in the Building* ‘Ādil Imām stated that he was against the demonstrations and that they were destructive and not in the nation’s interest. He added that “there is a big difference between demonstrations that serve the nation and demonstrations that are against the nation” (Muḥammad Samīḥ, 2005). These and other similar statements clearly put ‘Ādil Imām on the side of the regime in its conflict with the opposition, and support a reading of the film as a comment on the political landscape of contemporary Egypt.

‘Ādil Imām had a reputation for being reluctant to give interviews. He used to envelope himself with a kind of mystique and reveal very little about himself to the public (al-Bāz, 2007). Neither did he care much about prizes. He used to claim that the only ‘prize’ he cared about was that people loved his films and went to see them. But starting from the late 1990s ‘Ādil Imām seems to have changed this attitude (ibid), and now he appears on television quite regularly giving longer interviews. These interviews tend to be just as much, if not more than, about him and his political views and analyses, as about his acting and films, and he increasingly gives the regime his support on crucial issues. In a third-world country like Egypt, an artist cannot rely solely on his popular support. Naturally, the state also has its say (al-Shinnāwī, 2006). The state controls enough assets to enable it to enforce its will on an artist. Not only can it censor films and deny an artist access to the media – not only to state media but also to privately owned media outlets in Cairo – it always has the possibility to exert pressure on an artist by following up unpaid taxes; it is a well-known ‘secret’ that taxes are paid from stars’ official wages, which differ from their real wages (ibid).⁹⁷ Al-Shinnāwī (ibid) claims that ‘Ādil Imām is very well aware of these conditions and that he therefore not only undertakes a careful reading of the political situation but also sometimes even outdoes the regime in his support. His position on the demonstrations is only one such example. Whereas the regime seems to have tolerated a certain degree of peaceful and controlled anti-government demonstration activity, which at one stage may even have served to uphold its image of tolerance, ‘Ādil Imām came out with an outright denunciation and de-legitimation of the same demonstrations (ibid).

In his film *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* (2007) ‘Ādil Imām (here as Murgān) explains that: “If you want to survive in this country, you have to secure your position from above and from below so that if those above let you down, those beneath will catch you; and if those beneath turn against you, those above will protect you.” Even though this sentence is Murgān’s, it could also be taken as an illustration of how ‘Ādil Imām to varying degrees plays on both strings in order to secure his position. ‘Ādil Imām is not only an artist who has gained a broad popular base, he seems also to have worked hard to gain access to, and ingratiate himself with, official circles (ibid). Starting in the late 1980s and up to the mid-1990s, he used to invite both prominent officials, including ministers, and cultural figures to official pre-launch performances of his films at the Cairo Opera House. These events were not only good advertisements but also gave him an aura of official sanction and support. In addition to ministers and people from the regime, other public figures, such as the political

writer Muḥammad Ḥasanayn Haykal – who currently is outside the regime but who, because of his relationship with ‘Abd al-Nāṣir, enjoys national credibility – was always invited, and ‘Ādil Imām was always careful to remain on good terms with prominent opposition figures (ibid).

‘Ādil Imām takes care to maintain good, direct and personal relations with both officials and the president. While several of his films in the early 1980s encountered problems with the censorship, I have not found any examples of films that have been stopped or scripts that have had to be radically rewritten in my period of study. On the contrary, it seems that ‘Ādil Imām even occasionally makes use of his personal relationship with the president to help him through the bureaucracy of censorship. It seems that this is what happened with both *The Bucket and the Teapot* and *The Embassy is in the Building*. ‘Ādil Imām explains that as State Security had some objections to the latter film, it was the president who gave him the go-ahead, adding that “he [i.e. the president] is my support” (*huwwa sanadī*) (cited from al-Laythī, 2009). This direct support enables ‘Ādil Imām to venture into previously forbidden territory in his films, deal with controversial themes and push the borders of the sayable. But while ‘Ādil Imām’s films are sometimes bold in the thematic, or include sarcastic political comments or scenes – Egyptian critics often note these comments and tend to exaggerate their importance – they always generally remain firmly within the dominant official discourse and support it.

‘Ādil Imām’s support for the government’s position is still more clearly stated in interviews he gives than in his films. He has recently supported President Mubārak in the elections and has expressed his ‘optimism’ with regard to the new generation of politicians, which in this context means the President’s son Gamāl Mubārak. Similar to what can be observed in his films, he always underpins his views by invoking ‘national interest’, reason, responsibility and modernity.

In 2000 the High Commissioner appointed ‘Ādil Imām as a UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador⁹⁸ with focus on refugee issues in Africa, something which added to his official role. On the UN’s Egyptian website it says that ‘Ādil Imām “in the course of his rich career [...] mixed humour with sadness to portray ordinary people victims of injustice and poverty. He courageously denounced corruption, religious fanaticism, terrorism and dictatorship. He has always defended human dignity, promoted tolerance, democracy and human rights” (UN in Egypt, 2007).

Throughout this thesis I have shown how ‘Ādil Imām has ‘denounced corruption, religious fanaticism and terrorism’ and that, by denouncing fanaticism, he has seemingly ‘promoted’ its opposite, which is ‘tolerance’. But in interviews when ‘Ādil Imām speaks about democracy, which, according to the UN, is one of the things he has promoted, it becomes clear that he speaks about a ‘democracy’ of the government – a government which is not known for being democratic, but whose discourse remains one of democratic reform. Like that of the regime, his discourse is one of ‘reform from above’. It is not the regime that stands in the way of implementation of democracy, but apparently ‘the people’. “Democracy will not come by itself. We [the people] have to act in a democratic way too. The opposition is not democratic. What is being said and all the insults have nothing to do with democracy. What has Ḥusnī Mubārak done to be insulted like this? The man has done us a lot of good” (cited from al-Laythī, 2009). Asked about whether he sees that there is ‘a crisis of trust’ between government and people, ‘Ādil Imām answers that indeed there is. “People are always against the government, seemingly without reason. But to be honest, this is connected with a lot of different factors: culture (*thaqāfa*), education (*ta’līm*) and tact (*dhō*). I quite often would like to see some more tactfulness (*ana kull shuwayya baftaqid al-dhō*). We [i.e. the Egyptians] are no longer able to address each other in a proper way” (ibid). Not unlike in *The Embassy is in the Building*, in which people and opposition were described as ‘hotheads’ while the government embodied responsibility, he here asks both people and opposition to ‘behave themselves’. While the ‘hotheads’ in the film needed guidance, the people here need to be elevated or civilised in order to be able to act in a ‘democratic’ manner. In the same interview he describes the opposition press in Egypt as “a retard given a drum (*habla wa-massikūha ṭabla*),” which means a lot of noise for nothing. The President, on the other hand, is described as very tolerant and patient in accepting all these ‘insults’. “I have never seen a president being insulted (*biyitshitim*) like that without replying” (ibid). It sounds as if the regime is the ‘victim’ of a ‘people’ that is just too difficult to elevate. The ‘higher civilisational level’ to which the people should be elevated is one where both people and opposition should act as a harmonious complementary unit with the government. The opposition should be polite, supportive and constructive and its role – akin to what ‘Ādil Imām did in his ‘anti-corruption’ films – is to make the government aware of its mistakes in order to help it improve. It may sound as if, for him, democracy is a state of harmony in which people and regime pull in the same direction and not, as is the case at present, one in which the people frustrate the regime in its efforts to elevate them. The

tolerance, human rights and democracy that ‘Ādil Imām, according to the UN, has always defended is therefore not one of pluralism but of harmony, with focus on duty and not on rights. Even though the modernist discourse that ‘Ādil Imām utilises, both in his films and in his argumentation, is a discourse of ‘reform’, it reinforces hegemony and legitimates status quo; and although his rhetoric is one of ‘exposing’, I would argue that it covers up more than it exposes.

It is not only in internal political matters that ‘Ādil Imām has offered the regime his support. He is also increasingly contributing towards reinforcing Egypt’s position regionally. Egypt’s regional legitimacy is increasingly being challenged by the so-called ‘radicals’ – i.e. Iran, Ḥizb Allāh and Ḥamās. In the latest Gaza War (Dec. 2008 – Jan. 2009), as Egypt’s official position became increasingly difficult to defend and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt accused the regime of having common interests with Israel in the defeat of Ḥamās, ‘Ādil Imām stepped in and announced that Ḥamās only had itself to blame for Israel’s attack. His argument here is again very similar to that seen in his films. Ḥamās and their supporters are criticised on two levels. Firstly, they lack reason. “When you send rockets, you can’t expect the enemy to send you flowers” (ibid), and “when you are going to war, you have to take into consideration the power of the enemy” (cited from Ṣalāḥ, 2009); and secondly, they lack values. He accused Ḥamās of trading in martyrs and using their people as human shields while they themselves were allegedly “sitting in air-conditioned suites” doing nothing but claiming that the catastrophe was victory (ibid) while “we [i.e. Egypt] sacrificed our souls and wealth for Palestine – and now they are only insulting us” (ibid). Again, as in *The Embassy is in the Building*, Egypt’s official ‘moderate’ position becomes the only morally viable position that can be defended by reason.

In his argumentation, be it in regard to the regional situation reinforcing Egypt’s position vis-à-vis its Arab neighbours or when he comments on the internal political situation, in a typical modernist way he compares Arab backwardness and emotionality with western reason and development. Making fun of the emotional demonstrations in support of Gaza, he said that “I have never heard anyone shout ‘with our blood and our soul we will sacrifice ourselves for you, Sarkozy’ or ‘dear England’” (cited from al-Laythī, 2009), and “Israel (i.e. a western and developed country) is not loudmouth (ḥangūrī) like us (i.e. the Arabs); when they say something, they do it” (cited from Ṣalāḥ, 2009).

‘Ādil Imām’s recent statements on the Gaza War were not well received by many of his audience and fellow artists – especially not by those from other Arab countries, and they

even earned him another death threat, this time from Abū Muṣ‘ab ‘Abd al-Wadūd, the leader of al-Qā‘ida in Algeria. This threat was again – and Maḥmūd Ṣalāḥ’s article in *Akhbār al-Ḥawādith* is an example of this – exploited by the official media to express solidarity with their ‘national hero’ and recall his long history of confrontation with ‘the forces of darkness’. As the regional struggle for hegemony in the Arab World intensifies, and the regime needs to win public opinion for its ‘moderate’ line, ‘Ādil Imām has become ever more confrontational in his language. He concluded the press conference at the opening of the shooting of his latest film, *Bobbos* (2009), with a salute to “Egypt – the mother of the Arabs, who only insult her” (*maṣr umm il-‘arab illi biyishtimūha*) (cited from N. N., 2009), and it has already been announced that his coming film, *The Nagi Atallah Gang*, which is currently under production, will deal with this internal Arab-Arab conflict. In this film ‘Ādil Imām will be an Egyptian ex-officer working in Israel. There he decides to rob an Israeli bank, together with former colleagues. Dressed in Israeli uniforms, they escape to Lebanon, where they are kidnapped by Ḥizb Allāh. Consequently, the film will take them to Syria and Iraq, before finally, when they think it is over and they are on their way back to Egypt, their plane is hijacked and they are flown to Somalia (al-Laythī, 2009). The film will probably expose the ‘resistance movements’ and factions and land on reinforcement of Egypt’s role as the natural and only ‘leader’ of the Arab world. Through this we can see that ‘Ādil Imām is growing increasingly responsive to the current needs of the regime. For him, Egypt, the regime and the people are one and the same thing, and his defence of the regime is dressed up in a nationalist language whereby an attack on the current regime is an attack on the honour of Egypt itself.

The Yacoubian Building and reformist cinema

With its 30 million EGP budget, *The Yacoubian Building* (2006) was the biggest production of Egyptian cinema until then. The film is based on the eponymous 2002 bestselling novel by ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī. The novel itself aroused controversy. Since the mid-1990s ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī has been a regular contributor to the main Egyptian opposition or independent newspapers, notably *al-Sha‘b*, *al-Dustūr*, and *al-‘Arabī* (Jacquemond, 2008, p. 233), and his novel was turned down by government-owned publishers three times before being accepted by Merit Publishing House (Ingrid Wassmann, 2008). The novel is a portrait of various inhabitants of a previously grandiose building in downtown Cairo and acts as a

mirror of society. It mercilessly exposes political and moral corruption in contemporary Egypt. While the novel was perceived as being very bold in its 'exposing', it was criticised on the literary level for presenting little new and rather taking the Arabic novel back to the conventional realism of the 1940s and 50s and failing to realise ideals of aesthetic innovation (Jacquemond, 2008, p. 235). The popular success of the novel only increased and reconfirmed the criticism that it was speculative, a product of a 'winning formula' and not a true work of art (ibid).

While the novel and its writer in many ways were associated with dissidence and bold criticism of both regime and society, the same could no longer be said of the film team. As has been shown, 'Ādil Imām was by now firmly positioned as a supporter of the regime. This is also true of the rest of the film team. The film was produced by Good News 4 Film, owned by the Egyptian media mogul 'Imād al-Dīn Adīb, who was seen as the mastermind behind President Mubārak's election campaign in 2005 ('Aṭiyya, 2005) and who is also the publisher of the independent daily newspaper *Nahḍat Miṣr*, a paper widely seen as being allied to the Gamāl Mubārak wing of the ruling NDP. In April 2005 he also held a meticulously produced six-hour, three-part television interview with the President that was shown on four TV channels simultaneously.⁹⁹ The reworking of the novel into a film script was done by Waḥīd Ḥāmid who, not unlike 'Ādil Imām, in several political articles and interviews had announced his support for the President's son Gamāl Mubārak on condition that he would be elected democratically (Samīr Farīd, 2006), while the director of the film was Waḥīd Ḥāmid's son Marwān Ḥāmid, who had directed a 15-minute Mubārak promotional film shown on Egyptian state television and who, according to Farīd (ibid), was the election campaign's 'official' director.

That this group of people, who all were involved, in varying degrees, in the bid for President Mubārak's re-election, simultaneously were working on the filmatisation of a popular novel associated with political and social criticism and dissidence whose author is an active member of the Kifāyā movement,¹⁰⁰ was to be a riddle that that seems to have perplexed several commentators.¹⁰¹ The film was going to be just as, if not more, controversial than the novel, and it evolved into the bestselling Egyptian film that year. The film was also noticed in the west, not only because it was based on a famous novel¹⁰² but also because it was assumed again – not unlike *Terrorism and Barbecue* earlier – that it said something that could not have been said before.

I would contend that there is no riddle at all. The filmatisation of a popular novel like *The Yacoubian Building*, written within the traditional realist-reformist paradigm of Egyptian literature and ‘boldly’ exposing the flaws of contemporary society, not only fits perfectly into the oeuvre of ‘Ādil Imām, but is also in line with the regime’s agenda at the time. Like most of ‘Ādil Imām’s films, starting from *Playing with the Grownups*, also *The Yacoubian Building*’s concern is to point a finger at all that is wrong, to expose a whole range of deviations, judge them morally and thus call for their reform. Moreover, the controversy occasioned by the film and the parliamentary campaign initiated by the conservative pan-Arab nationalist independent MP Muṣṭafā Bakrī in order to have the film censored,¹⁰³ only confirmed the regime’s ‘enlightened’ position and enabled the regime, who refused to yield to the campaign’s pressure (it licensed the film uncut, only giving it an ‘Adult Only’ seal), to pose as a protector of art and freedom, while the conservative parliamentary opposition, who lost the battle, became the ‘birds of darkness’ attempting to curb this freedom. The roles of government and opposition were again turned upside down. The government press could once again – as they had with *Terrorism and Barbecue* 14 years earlier – take pride in the ‘extraordinary’ level of freedom that the country was enjoying. Samīr Ragab, for example, writes “[The film] is a testimony to the freedom and democracy that this nation is enjoying, and which has reached a degree we can be proud of. Especially since I am sure that, after September 11th, not even the USA herself licenses bold films like this” (Ragab, 2006).

Although, in general, the film keeps very close to the original novel, several important changes have been made. I would assert that several of these changes are not merely artistic but that they are systematic and contribute to turn the narrative pro-government enough to fit into the regime’s ‘reform’ agenda. Through these changes the narrative is altered from one of dissidence to one of hegemonic reform. In general I would claim that the film has depoliticised the narrative, and I will point to three major changes from novel to film that account for this depoliticising and ensure that politically the film remains firmly within the accepted limits.

The first of these changes is both how the film represents the Islamists and the role they play in the narrative. The representation of the fundamentalists has been altered in order to conform to the usual stereotypical representation of the fundamentalist in ‘Ādil Imām’s films. In the novel there are two sheikhs – Shaykh Shākir and Shaykh al-Sammān. Each of them represents his own particular ‘brand’ of Islamic fundamentalism. The first

represents the anti-regime radicals and the second the pro-regime conservatives. The novel gives Shaykh Shākir ample opportunity to voice the political discourse of the radicals, especially how the ‘infidels’ (i.e. the US-led coalition in the Gulf War) are killing innocent Muslim children in Iraq and how al-Azhar and the official religious establishment are in the hands of the regime and provide it with religious legitimation for its ‘anti-Islamic’ policy. In the novel, Shaykh al-Sammān, who represents this official religious establishment, confirms the radicals’ complaints. He is totally preoccupied with defending the regime’s position on the Gulf War, and he even legitimises abortion. In the film, on the other hand, Shaykh al-Sammān’s role as a regime-friendly sheikh has been omitted altogether.¹⁰⁴ The ‘radicals’ political discourse has also been toned down. Neither Iraq nor al-Azhar are mentioned in the film. While Shaykh Shākir’s inflammatory speech at the university in the novel is a complete Islamist argument about the current regime’s illegitimacy and ends with a call for jihād, his speech in the film is shortened, focusing on the claim that the regime earns illicit money from gambling, alcohol and tourism.¹⁰⁵ The film thus excises most of the important arguments that could ‘legitimise’ the radicals and compromise the regime. By adding the argument of ‘illicit money earned through tourism’ – a source of income a large number of Egyptians are dependent on – the Islamist speech is turned into one that de-legitimises the radicals rather than compromising the regime.

Secondly, all Zakī al-Disūqī’s political views have been omitted. In the novel he criticises ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and the whole post-revolutionary order. The dialogue in which he criticised ‘Abd al-Nāṣir has been omitted altogether.¹⁰⁶ Both novel and film agree that Egypt is in a state of decay. But while in the novel Zakī al-Disūqī explicitly blames the revolution for this decay, the film refuses to blame ‘Abd al-Nāṣir. As in *Playing with the Grownups* the national narrative towards progress has ‘somewhere’ gone astray, but it is left unclear who is to blame. Criticism of certain aspects of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir’s regime is generally unproblematical in Egypt, and Egyptians are divided between supporters of ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and al-Sādāt. But questioning the very legitimacy of the revolution, as Zakī al-Disūqī does in the novel, is to question the legitimacy of the current regime. Mubārak draws his legitimacy from representing a continuation of the republican system of both ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and al-Sādāt, and has strategically refused to take sides between the regime’s left and right wing, which are associated with ‘Abd al-Nāṣir and al-Sādāt. In the novel Zakī al-Disūqī also claims that the reason for Egypt’s calamity is lack of democracy. This dialogue too has been omitted in the film.¹⁰⁷ But while most of his political views are muted in the film, Zakī al-

Disūqī retains his role as the ‘commentator’, commenting on the general state of decay in contemporary society. But all his comments in the film are basically moral and only indirectly political.

The third, and maybe most important, change is the absence of ‘The Big One’ (*al-rajul al-kabīr*) in the film, and it is probably this absence that led to rumours that the film had been censored.¹⁰⁸ The story of al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām (Nūr al-Sharīf) and Kamāl al-Fūlī is similar to the book. Kamāl al-Fūlī obtains a place in parliament for al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām for one million EGP, and when al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām signs a contract with a Japanese company Kamāl al-Fūlī demands a quarter of the profit. Also in the film Kamāl al-Fūlī is only a delegate; “I am only a delegate, and I swear that I am the kindest of them all,” but, contrary to the novel, there is no mention of any boss, and al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām is not granted any meeting with those that Kamāl al-Fūlī represents. Also in the novel the meeting with ‘The Big One’ is absurd, but by omitting it completely the Presidency is definitely left out of the range of criticism¹⁰⁹ and criticism is lowered to the level of the corrupt minister and parliamentarian. Popular readings of both the novel and the film liken Kamāl al-Fūlī to the NDP powerbroker Kamāl al-Shādhilī,¹¹⁰ who is one of the most powerful ‘members’ of the so-called ‘Old Guard’ within the ruling NDP. Exempting the President from criticism and focusing on the moral decay and corruption of an individual, although very powerful, politician who, through the ‘popular reading’ of the novel was already associated with the ‘Old Guard’, is very much in line with the call for reform that I have shown is present in most of ‘Ādil Imām’s films, and which the film shares with the so-called ‘Young Guard’ led by the President’s son Gamāl Mubārak, whom most of those involved in the film support.

I would therefore claim that the above-mentioned changes have been made not only in order to adapt to the limits of the sayable and squeeze the novel into a film in accordance with the ‘law of decreasing freedom’, but rather that these changes account for an appropriation of a novel of ‘dissidence’ by turning it into a film of ‘hegemony’ that no longer represents any threat to the regime and possibly even supports it. This is done first by muting all the political anti-regime statements that the novel contains and by exempting the Presidency from criticism. Thereafter the film strengthens the focus on morality. It condemns the moral decay of individuals both in society and government and calls for reform.

The film focuses heavily on values. Its main characters each represent a set of values. Ḥātim Rashīd and Zakī al-Disūqī (‘Ādil Imām) each represent ‘western’ values. Zakī

represents positively charged western values such as knowledge and enlightenment, while the homosexual Ḥātim represents decadence and negatively charged western values. Negatively charged traditional Egyptian values are represented by al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām. These three characters are all in a relationship with ‘common’ Egyptians (Zakī-Buthayna / ‘Azzām-Su‘ād / Ḥātim-‘Abd Rabbuh), who initially all represent positively charged traditional values. Of these relationships there is only one possible positively evaluated combination. The unification of Buthayna al-Sayyid and Zakī al-Disūqī thus represents the re-envisioning of the imagined modernist alliance between Egyptian cultural heritage and western cultural influences. Buthayna and Zakī al-Disūqī constitute the two poles who, if combined, form Egyptian modernism. Drowned in a corrupt environment where all the other characters are either victims, perpetrators or both, these two poles are drawn towards each other. Zakī extends Buthayna protection and guidance and elevates her out of her humiliation. Through their combination, the ‘purity’ of Egyptian values is retained. He saves her from being ‘corrupted’ by the likes of Ṭalāl – the Syrian shop owner who takes her to his storage room and masturbates on her garments. Buthayna, on the other hand, provides Zakī with a firm anchorage in the Egyptian heritage and identity, thus putting an end to his marginal existence.

While the Buthayna-Zakī axis represents modernism, Ḥātim Rashīd’s homosexual relationship with Upper-Egyptian conscript ‘Abd Rabbuh and al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām’s marriage to his second wife Su‘ād represent its negation. ‘Abd Rabbuh and Su‘ād both represent the same sound traditional values as Buthayna, but they are humiliated and corrupted. Ḥātim ‘elevates’ his lover into decadence and corruption. Al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām deprives Su‘ād of her most basic right – the right to be a real wife and have children – and when he divorces her after having killed her fetus, he humiliates her by giving her ‘all her rights’ as stipulated by the sharī‘a. The initial relationship between Buthayna and Ṭāhā is also deemed to fail. The combination would not have been able to ‘elevate’ them. After his humiliation Ṭāhā chooses fundamentalism – modernism’s main competitor. The film therefore speaks a modernist language and its gallery of characters moves within a modernist universe in which western / eastern and positively / negatively charged values are combined in different positively and negatively evaluated combinations, with the ‘alternative modernity’ – fundamentalism – ‘the wrong alternative’, lurking on the sideline.

Most, if not all, of the film’s comments describing the state of general decay and defining Egyptian identity are uttered by Zakī al-Disūqī and Buthayna. The other characters

‘act’, but Buthayna and Zakī also ‘comment’. The downtrodden and humiliated Buthayna gives the audience the feeling of how it is to be the humiliated common man; “Egypt has become too cruel to its people. That’s why everybody wants to leave. It’s not that we hate her, but people are unable to endure her injustice”¹¹¹ Zakī, on the other hand, comments from ‘above’. He describes the Egyptians’ ‘backwardness’ as compared to foreigners – “Foreigners know how to appreciate alcohol. Here we appreciate hashish. There is a big difference between the two”¹¹² – and the current state of decay as compared to the past, and he ‘objectively’ points his finger at all that is wrong. As in *Playing with the Grownups* and to a similar effect, Zakī’s main ‘outburst’ of frustration over the deterioration of Egypt is placed under the statue of Ṭal‘at Ḥarb.¹¹³ He is drunk and Buthayna leads him home across Ṭal‘at Ḥarb Square. Beneath the statue he starts to explain that “This country was better than Paris, the latest fashions used to arrive here before they reached Paris, the streets were clean, the shops were grandiose and people were polite.”¹¹⁴ Gradually he becomes more and more agitated, and when Buthayna begs him to calm down because people are looking, he starts shouting: “Why should they look? They should look at the country that has been ruined! At the buildings that were better than those in Europe. Now they [look like] dunghills on top and are disfigured and ugly from below (*mazābil min fō’ wa min taḥt maskh*).” He then looks up at the statue of Ṭal‘at Ḥarb and shouts: “We are in the age of degeneration (*zaman al-maskh*).”

The film gave rise to controversy mainly because of its sexual aspects. Modest female nakedness for the sake of seduction and which retains the traditional gender relationship is the rule rather than the exception in Egyptian cinema, but in *The Yacoubian Building* several scenes were deemed repulsive. Both the scene in which Ṭalāl masturbates on Buthayna’s clothes and the one in which Ṭāhā is raped in prison by police officers were condemned. But it was especially the homosexual relationship between Ḥātim Rashīd and ‘Abd Rabbuh that resulted in protests. Homosexual characters in Egyptian films usually only play the role of an object of ridicule or act as a negative mirror reconfirming traditional masculinity. *The Yacoubian Building* was different in that respect. The film represents Ḥātim in a realistic, not, as usual, comical way. But even though the film goes far in explaining his homosexuality and gives it a ‘human’ face – in a lengthy scene after ‘Abd Rabbuh has left him, he blames his parents for the ‘cold’ upbringing he received – the way the matter is dealt with remains very traditional and moralistic. Heavenly wrath is wreaked on them both, first through the sudden illness and death of ‘Abd Rabbuh’s son and then through

Ḥātīm being killed and robbed on a one-night stand.¹¹⁵ Also the other deviations are punished, Ṭāhā kills the officer that ordered him raped in prison, and is himself being killed in the same incident. In the scene where, after al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām sends women to perform an abortion on Su‘ād, he is also punished for his crime. Kamāl al-Fūlī now threatens al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām,¹¹⁶ and when he finally yields and agrees to give al-Fūlī 25% of his profits, the price has been raised and he now has to pay 50%.

Despite the unprecedented dealing with homosexuality in the film – a subject which Egyptian popular cinema, with very few exceptions, had refused to deal with seriously before – *The Yacoubian Building* remains a thoroughly conservative film. The flaws in society, including homosexuality, are all condemned on a moral basis, and although at first sight the film may seem to be an aggravating representation of Egypt in the Mubārak era, it is far from threatening the system or questioning any dominant concepts. ‘Ādil Adīb, representative of the production company, confirms this and claims that “any fair look at the film would confirm that it is not against the regime (*al-niẓām*). But we have laid before its eyes flaws (*akhṭā*) that really are present and that we must get rid of.” I would therefore tend to agree with Samīr Farīd (2006) when he claims that while the novel was an expression of anger, the film is an expression of “the cinema of political reform which is being directed by the Policy Committee in the ruling NDP led by Gamāl Mubārak” (Farīd, 2006). Even the way homosexuality is dealt with in the film is, according to Farīd, in line with, and only confirms that the film belongs to this political reform trend, for which the support for freedom of expression is one of the important components.

Concluding remarks

In summing up the findings of this survey I will conclude that 'Ādil Imām has increasingly become a proponent of dominant ideology. This is to be detected both in his films and from his real life appearances, where he increasingly surrounds himself with an aura of 'officialdom' and where he speaks on behalf of the nation as a whole.

Concerning his films, I would suggest a division of 'Ādil Imām's oeuvre over the last twenty years into three distinct periods. There is congruence between these periods and the scriptwriters 'Ādil Imām co-operated with. But this congruence is only partial and I am therefore still able to conclude that we are dealing with periods and not only with the personal preferences of different scriptwriters. The first half of the 1990s was a period of renewed and combative modernism.¹¹⁷ The second half of the 1990s and possibly the first years of the new millennium compromise a second period.¹¹⁸ This period is characterised by a return to vulgarism and a partly submergence of the explicit modernist message. This was followed by a third period,¹¹⁹ which started around the turn of the millennium, when nationalism and modernism again returned in 'Ādil Imām's films, and this time seemingly more permanently.

I have attempted to explain the changes behind this classification of his films into three distinct periods through the changing political circumstances in Egypt on the one hand and the changing structure of the target audience on the other. Modernism, social unity and nationalism returned in 'Ādil Imām's films in the early 1990s, probably mainly in response to the 'Islamist threat'. This 'first' return was bold, combative and confrontational. Once the immediate threat had disappeared the modernist rhetoric seems to have been submerged and 'Ādil Imām returned to a kind of vulgarism. This renewed vulgarism could indicate that the return to modernism at that time was somewhat premature and forced. This is where the second explanation comes in. The state of Egypt's cinemas had been constantly deteriorating since their nationalisation in 1963, and audiences gradually became increasingly lower-class male (Shafik, 2007, pp. 283-84). This trend started to undergo a reversal in the early 1990s, reaching its fulfilment in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The increasingly lower-class identity of the audiences throughout the 1970s and 1980s was definitely an additional factor that contributed to the rise of anti-modernism. It is therefore not unlikely that 'Ādil Imām's return to this anti-modernist formula and vulgarity

in the latter half of the 1990s was a return to his 'natural' target audience and was guided by commercial interests. This periodification of 'Ādil Imām's films roughly corresponds to the general trend in Egyptian cinema of an increasingly clearly stated modernism, beginning in the mid-1990s. Through the films scripted by Waḥīd Ḥāmid, 'Ādil Imām may have been one of the earlier exponents of this trend and it is possibly for that reason that, in the later 1990s, he felt the need to return temporarily to his earlier formula in order to compete commercially.

On the other hand, the possibly permanent return to modernism that in 'Ādil Imām's films started in the early 2000s was different from that of the early 1990s. It was not primarily brought about by a regime or an elite that felt itself threatened, but was accompanied by a change in the target audience. The lower-class male audience had lost importance for film producers through the emergence of more expensive theatres at shopping malls. Because both explanations equally account for this 'second' return, I feel tempted to claim that the 'return' this time is of a more permanent nature. As in the early 1990s, the regime again has a problem of legitimacy. The state is again in need of support. The internal and external pressure for democratic reform is increasing. Simultaneously Egypt's position as a 'moderate' state in the Middle East is being challenged by 'radicals' (i.e. Iran, Ḥizb Allāh and Ḥamās). The regime's need for support is thus one explanation, the other being that this modernism is a shared ideology internalised by both producers and this new upper-middle-class audience. The dynamics of the audience's changing class structure could also be taken as an additional indication of the fact that modernism – the imagined alliance between the western-educated man and the common *ibn al-balad* – is an alliance primarily imagined by the 'westernised' and educated middle class, while it does not necessarily have the same relevance for the common, uneducated *ibn al-balad*. Modernism is the 'philosophy of the ruling class'. It is internalised and has partly become the 'philosophy of the masses' who 'accept its morality, customs, and institutional rules of behaviour', but they probably still feel relieved by the 'anti-modernist' films which don't blame them for failing to live up to the moral standards demanded of them by the 'modernising elite'.

The difference between the films of the first and second 'modernist period' is mainly one of style, subject matter and class approach. I would relate these differences partly to the different class structure of the audiences in the early 1990s when compared to that of the 2000s, and partly to a difference between the personal styles of Waḥīd Ḥāmid and Yūsuf

Ma'āṭī. While the films scripted by Yūsuf Ma'āṭī are milder, relying more on comedy than drama, and often give the impression of being built up of several separate sketches sewn together into a film, the political and social criticism is in many ways similar. I would say that most of 'Ādil Imām's films, and indeed many other Egyptian films, share a certain structure in their criticism. Common to all of them is that they expose deviations. After having exposed the deviations or flaws, the modernist films tend to follow one of two strategies, and many of them follow both.

The first strategy is to point out a middle road between deviations justly distributed over two parties. This can be observed, for example, in *The Embassy in the Building*, where 'Ādil Imām exposes both the pro- and the anti-normalisation camps, or in *Morgan Ahmed Morgan*, where he exposes both the fundamentalist and the westernised version of popular youth culture. In both cases he arrives at a 'middle position', which in the case of *The Embassy in the Building* is conveniently in line with the regime's position of 'cold peace', while in the case of *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* it confirms traditional dominant patriarchal values.

The other strategy is the re-envisioning of the imagined modernist alliance. The 'middle road' is pointed out through the combination of two poles, where one of the poles represents the common man and traditional (usually, but not always, sound) Egyptian values, and the other knowledge and enlightenment. This is what happened in *Sleeping in Honey* when Magdī Nūr ('Ādil Imām) – the representative of enlightenment – led the 'people' in a demonstration to parliament, and it is the same 'alliance' that is re-envisioned through the relationship between Zakī al-Disūqī and Buthayna al-Sayyid in *The Yacoubian Building*, and when Murgān marries Dr. Jīhān in *Morgan Ahmed Morgan*. 'Ādil Imām can play both poles. In *Playing with the Grownups* he is the common man who allies himself with the government representative. In *Terrorism and Barbecue* and *Sleeping in Honey* he is the one giving voice and elevating the people. In *The Terrorist* he is elevated by the enlightened host family, in *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* by Dr. Jīhān and in *The Yacoubian Building* it is he who elevates Buthayna.

The 'modernist alliance' is one in which sound values are combined with knowledge and enlightenment. Therefore the 'deviations' that are criticised always tend to lack one, or both, of the two components that make up the 'alliance'. It is usually either the values of the 'common man' (the *ibn al-balad*) or the knowledge of the 'modern educated man' that is lacking. And this is how the criticism tends to be based on values. The attack on the 'evil'

infitāhī capitalist in the early 1990s, for example in *Playing with the Grownups* and *The Forgotten One*, was heavily based on such values, while the widespread negligence in *Terrorism and Barbecue* and *Sleeping in Honey* was confronted with knowledge. The criticism of the fundamentalist follows the same logic. Fundamentalism is caused either by egoism and opportunism (i.e. the values are lacking) or by ignorance (i.e. education and enlightenment are lacking). The last variant can be ‘cured’ – as in *The Terrorist* – through the fundamentalist’s presence in an ‘enlightened’ environment.

The following table illustrates the ‘value system’ that ‘Ādil Imām’s films utilise.

	1: Negatively charged	2: Positively charged
A: ‘Western’	Opportunism, egoism, decadence	Knowledge, science, high-culture
B: ‘Egyptian’	Ignorance, superstition, backwardness, vulgarity	Ibn al-balad, rootedness

The modernist alliance is the combination of 2A with 2B. 2A elevates 2B or reforms 1B. The absence of 2A and 1B’s ‘elevation’ by 1A would account for an absence or inversion of modernism. The ‘flaws’ that are represented by 1B can be cured by a dose of 2A. 1A, on the other hand, is more difficult to cure and is therefore ‘othered’ and confronted. All ‘Ādil Imām’s films operate within this value system. *The Yacoubian Building* utilises it fully, having a main character for each set and combining them in different combinations. In *The Danish Experiment* Qadrī and his sons embody both 1B and 2B, while Anita Gutenberg represents 1A and 2A. The encounter results in the ‘Egyptian family’ receiving knowledge and science (2A). They are ‘modernised’. But Anita has to take her ‘decadence’ (1A) back with her to Denmark. Also when the ‘middle road’ strategy is utilised, the road projected is always one that combines reason (2A) with sound values (2B). In *The Embassy is in the Building*, the regime’s position of ‘cold peace’, is, for example, legitimised through being the only possible position that is based both on sound patriotic feelings and reason. The pro-normalisation camp is therefore refuted because of its values, while the anti-normalisation camp needs guidance. The exposing of deviations based on the above value system is a shared aspect of both ‘Ādil Imām’s modernist and anti-modernist films. The difference between the two types of film is that the anti-modernist films don’t follow up by pursuing one of the two strategies of projecting a middle road or a modernist alliance. They only criticise, but without projecting any alternative.

Since the political criticism in 'Ādil Imām's films always follows a certain structure, which in turn is based on morality in accordance with the above-mentioned value system, the criticism never turns against the system itself. This does not necessarily mean that his films have not been bold. Most of them include comments and scenes which are definitely jabs in the side of the regime, and which, if viewed separately, could be understood as challenging hegemony. But the structure of his criticism, seen as a whole, does indeed reproduce the values on which the system is based, i.e. 'dominant ideology', and only criticises deviations from this system. "It is not about the system/regime (*al-niẓām*)," 'Ādil Imām explains, "I am criticising situations (*mawāqif*)" (cited from al-Laythī, 2009). What 'Ādil Imām calls 'situations' here, in this thesis I have called 'vices' or 'deviations'. His films are concerned with pointing out or exposing these 'vices' and his modernist films also point out the 'virtues'. This is done in accordance with a value system – a value system which is in line with that of the rulers, but which is internalised by the majority and dealt with as 'common sense'.

While his films – at least within the period of study – have therefore never been 'truly' critical in the sense that they challenge dominant concepts and hegemony, always directing their criticism at immoral individuals or deviations from the 'straight path', there has, on the other hand, undeniably been a gradual liberalisation and widening of the limits of the sayable in all fields, and writers now enjoy a greater freedom of expression than they did at any previous stage during the 20th century (Jacquemond, 2004, p. 41). Although *Terrorism and Barbecue* and *The Yacoubian Building* were both films that basically reproduced traditional value systems reconfirming and supporting dominant ideology, it probably remains equally true that neither of them could have been made ten years earlier. But in the case of 'Ādil Imām, it seems that his boldest and most confrontational films also in many ways are those most supportive of the regime. It may seem that 'Ādil Imām's films deal with previously political taboo topics only in the most supportive manner, and only at moments of history when this is in line with the regime's interests and needs. This was most likely the case with his cinematic attack on fundamentalism in the first half of the 1990s, sectarianism in 2008 and the way he dealt with Egyptian-Israeli relations in *The Embassy is in the Building* in 2005.

So while there has definitely been a gradual shift in the limits of criticism on the one hand, and this criticism has gradually crept closer to the centre of power, 'Ādil Imām has on the other hand taken upon himself the role of a disseminator of official views and positions.

This is not only done through his films, but maybe even more clearly in his increasingly frequent real-life appearances at different events and in television interviews, where he lends the regime his support on crucial issues and often even overbids its declared and undeclared positions. Unlike the regime's officials, he is, after all, an individual and free to hold his own opinions. He is therefore in a position to state the regime's views more boldly and straightforwardly than the regime itself can do, and it is indeed not unlikely that 'Ādil Imām, as an individual close to the regime, is consciously being utilised by the regime to express support in a popular and humouristic way. As an embodiment of the 'common man' he is in a position to express both popular and less popular opinions as if these were the views that represent the nation and the people. I would therefore contend that 'Ādil Imām has become an important institution close to the regime and a voice representing its official ideology. It is therefore likely that, for Mubārak's regime, he has attained a role similar to that 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ had for that of Gamāl 'Abd al-Nāṣir. 'Ādil Imām belongs to the same generation as President Mubārak. He ascended to the throne of the entertainment industry with *Ragab on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1979, only one year before Mubārak became president. His name will therefore always be associated with the Mubārak era. But while 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥāfiẓ was singing the praises of a youthful forward-storming revolutionary nation, 'Ādil Imām's role has rather been to defend an aging regime that is struggling to stay in power internally and regain its position regionally.

Notes

¹ In chronological order the films are: *Playing with the Grownups* [*al-La'b ma'a al-Kibār*] (1991), *The Forgotten One* [*al-Mansī*] (1992), *Terrorism and Barbecue* [*al-Irhāb wa-l-Kabāb*] (1993), *The Terrorist* [*al-Irhābī*] (1994), *Bakhit and Adila* [*Bakhīt wa 'Adīla*] (1995), *Birds of Darkness* [*Ṭuyūr al-Ḍalām*] (1995), *Sleeping in Honey* [*al-Nawm fī l-'Asal*] (1996), *Bakhit and Adila II: the Bucket and the Teapot* [*Bakhīt wa 'Adīla: al-Jardal wa-l-Kanaka*] (1997), *A Message from the Ruler* [*Risāla min al-Wālī*] (1998), *Mahrous, the Minister's Boy* [*al-Wād Maḥrūs bitā' al-Wazīr*] (1999), *Hello America* [*Hālū Amrīkā*] (2000), *Prince of Darkness* [*Amīr al-Ḍalām*] (2002), *The Danish Experiment* [*al-Tajriba al-Dinimārkiyya*] (2003), *Groom from the Security Apparatus* [*'Arīs min Jiha Amniyya*] (2004), *The Embassy is in the Building* [*al-Sifāra fī l-'Imāra*] (2005), *The Yacoubian Building* [*'Imārat Ya'qūbiyān*] (2006), *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* [*Murgān Aḥmad Murgān*] (2007) and *Hassan and Murqus* [*Ḥasan wa Murquṣ*] (2008). His latest two films, *Bobbos* [*Būbbūs*] (2009) and *The Naji Atallah Gang* [*Firqat Nājī 'Atā Allah*] (to be released later in 2009), are not part of this thesis as I have not had the chance to see them yet. I will from now on only use the English titles of these films.

² The bestseller list at www.fineartfilm.com (accessed 21.05.2009), the only website I know of that sells only Arabic DVDs, reveals that four of 'Ādil Imām's plays are on the top 10 list (ranked nos. 5, 6, 8 and 9), while only two of his films are on the same list (as no. 1: *The Embassy is in the Building* (2005) and no. 2: *The Yacoubian Building* (2006)). This source is, of course, problematic; I would guess that the customers probably are mainly expat Arabs and that few Egyptians order from this site. It nevertheless affords an indication of the popularity of these plays.

³ *Ibn al-balad* (plur.: *awlād al-balad*), which can be translated as 'a son of the town/place', is the real Egyptian. The term can apply both to 'a specific group of Egyptians' – those who live in a traditional quarter (*ḥāra*), work at certain occupations (usually independent trades) and wear a traditional robe (*jallābiyya*), but the term also applies to certain 'behavioural characteristics and norms' (el-Messiri, 1978, cited from Armbrust, 1996, p. 25). The term '*ibn al-balad*' is usually positively charged and carries a strong sense of self-identity – it can mean 'the salt of the earth' but also a 'rough diamond' (Armbrust, 1996, p. 25) that, from the modernist point of view of the elite, needs to be polished or elevated through education and high-culture in order to become a true focal point of identity.

⁴ Egyptian producers often finance their productions by raising production loans from domestic and foreign distributors. The amount of the loan will depend on the status and popularity of the leading players (Shafik, 2007, p. 210).

⁵ In a similar way, asked whether 'Ādil Imām had demanded any changes to the scenario of *Murgān Aḥmad Murgān*, Yūsuf Ma'āṭī, one of 'Ādil Imām's scriptwriters, explained that "We are together from the very beginning and we are continuously in contact with each other during the writing of the scenario. I have never gone to 'Ādil Imām with a finished scenario. The continuous dialog about the scenario makes 'Ādil Imām present in every bit of it. That's why he didn't demand any changes" (Khālid Nāgiḥ, 2008).

⁶ The choice of Shirīn as his female co-star in the *Bakhit and Adila* trilogy (1995, 1997 and 2000), for example, is attributed to him (Irīs Naẓmī, 1995).

⁷ Accordingly maximum freedom is accorded to books, their censorship in advance of publication having been abolished in 1977. Less freedom is allowed to audiovisual media such as theatre, cinema, and audio and video cassettes, all of which have to be submitted for advance censorship by the Ministry of Culture (Law No 38 of 1992) (Jacquemond, 2008, p. 39). Thus while, for example, the poems of Aḥmad Fu'ād Nig'm are available in most bookshops in Cairo, the same poems when sung by al-Shaykh Imām are, as far as I know, only available on home-copied cassettes sold through the leftist *tagammu'* party.

⁸ The film's name 'Ghazal al-Banāt' can mean both *Candy Floss* and *The Flirtation of Girls*.

⁹ Although these films were not really a trilogy, their titles indicate that they were intentionally linked. In all of the films the protagonist bears the name of an Islamic month, in itself a sign of lower-class or fallāḥī identity, and he is always on, or below, something indicating that he is in trouble.

¹⁰ *Gate Five* is the only film in which 'Ādil Imām co-stars with Nāḍiyā al-Gindī, his main rival at the box office in the 1980s and early 1990s. The film is also the only 'Ādil Imām film ever to have been completely banned from cinema. 'Ādil Imām jokes that this was a result of the superstitious Nāḍiyā al-Gindī's exaggerated use of talismans and incense during the filming (cited from Sarḥān, 2006). The film was re-released on cinema in 1994.

¹¹ Other examples of films by 'Ādil Imām which were actually censored because they 'damaged Egypt's reputation' are *Hamada and Toto Gang* [*Iṣābat Ḥamāda wa-Tūtu*] and *Antar carries his Sword* [*Antar shāyil Sēfu*] (both from 1982). In the first, both a scene where 'Ādil Imām robs a school, dressed as a sheikh, and another including a homosexual character, had to be removed before screening was permitted (Zaynab 'Abd Allāh, 1999). The second film was taken off screen only to be re-released after several scenes had been removed (ibid).

¹² One of the few examples of films with 'Ādil Imām to be censored for purely political reasons is *The Ghoul* [*al-Ghūl*] (1983). The end scene in which 'Ādil Imām kills the 'evil' business man, was according to the censors, too similar to the recent assassination of al-Sādāt and had to be cut before the film was granted a licence ('Abd Allāh, 1999).

¹³ My DVD (released by Rotana) gives the English title as *The Big Game*. In the text I will stick to the title *Playing with the Grownups*, which is a better translation of the title.

¹⁴ My DVD (released by Fine Art Film) gives the English title as *Fast Asleep*. In the text I will stick to the title *Sleeping in Honey*, which is the correct translation of the title.

¹⁵ 'Ādil Imām had previously starred in several films scripted by Waḥīd Ḥāmid (*Man lives only once* [*al-Insān ya'īsh Marra Wāḥida*] (1981), *Vote for Dr. Sulayman Abd al-Baset* [*Intikhibū al-Duktūr Sulaymān 'Abd al-Bāsīt*] (1981), *The Ghoul* (1983), *The Worthless* [*al-Halfūt*] (1985) and *Certified Dangerous* [*Musaggil Khaṭar*] (1991)). But most of these films fit into the old picture of anti-modernism. *Certified Dangerous*, the last 'Ādil Imām film scripted by Waḥīd Ḥāmid before 'the quartet', for example, is about three criminals who get to know each other in prison. One of them, Muṣṭafā, had to confess to a crime he didn't commit in order to cover for his companions, so that they could take care of his sick wife. When they get out of prison they all return to crime, but Muṣṭafa discovers that his companions have let him down and that his wife is dead. He and his new friends from prison then take up the fight against his old comrades.

¹⁶ *Birds of Darkness* differs from the other four in several ways. The character of ‘Ādil Imām is not, as in the others, the unambiguous ‘good hero’. Although similar to the others, all in all this film carries a modernist message, the character of ‘Ādil Imām being rather the unscrupulous *fahlawī* who indulges in corruption, as in many of his films of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The general atmosphere in the film is one of failed modernism, with very few bright patches. Although the film includes many of the same actors, I have not noticed any intertextual ‘signs’ that could connect it with the others. *The Forgotten One* and *Sleeping in Honey* are connected with *Terrorism and Barbecue*, which in turn is connected with *Playing with the Grownups* through such signs. Another indication is that the film wasn’t a part of the plan. The artistic trio had already decided that *Terrorism and Barbecue* should be followed up by *Sleeping in Honey*, the last film of the ‘quartet’. But when ‘Ādil Imām went to Waḥīd Ḥāmid he was presented with the scenario for *Birds of Darkness* and grew so enthusiastic about it that he decided to postpone the scheduled filming of *Sleeping in Honey* (‘Ādil Imām, cited from Maḥmūd ‘Alī, 1995). I have therefore chosen to discuss this film in the next chapter, which will deal with the way ‘Ādil Imām’s films deal with Islamic fundamentalism.

¹⁷ The characters’ names could be interpreted as being additional hints to their respective roles. Ḥasan Bahlūl could be translated as ‘the good fool’ (i.e. the decent but uneducated ‘common man’), while Mu‘taṣim al-Alfī (Mu‘taṣim meaning ‘the guardian’) would be the ‘modernist institution’ guarding public interest.

¹⁸ This song *Egypt speaks about herself* [*Miṣr tataḥaddath ‘an nafsīha*] from 1951 (*qaṣīda* by Ḥāfiẓ Ibrāhīm) is, even though it is from before the revolution, one of Umm Kulthūm’s most popular nationalist songs. The text – the first line goes: “All mankind were watching as I built the foundations of my glory alone” (*waqafa l-xalqu yanzurūna gamī’an kayfa abnī qawā’ida l-magdi waḥdī*) – supports the narrative of Egypt’s glorious past.

¹⁹ It is along the railway line that Ghāda enters al-Mansī’s world as she tries to escape the party where she was being forced to prostitute herself. It was the same way that the belly dancer Dīna, in an earlier scene, came in one of al-Mansī’s sexual fantasies, and it is along the railway line that As‘ad Bēh comes with his bullies – reality catches up with al-Mansī and drags him out of his dream – to bring her back to the villa. And finally, it is along the railway line that the last confrontation between al-Mansī and the evil capitalists takes place.

²⁰ Mayy al-Tilmissānī (1993) writes that the protagonist in *The Forgotten One*, as in a fairytale, tries to compensate for his deprivation by separating himself from reality and escaping into dreams. On his regular way to his nightly job as a railway signalman, he first has to take a minibus. The bus is full of women dressed in black who, as a kind of warning of the evil to come, start to wail once the bus starts. Thereafter he has to walk for some distance before crossing a narrow waterway on a small boat, as the dead cross the river into the afterworld, thus separating himself not only mentally but also physically from reality.

²¹ In this scene there is an ‘intertextual reference’ to *Terrorism and Barbecue*, which was released the year before. Ḥasan Bahlūl (‘Ādil Imām), together with a friend, goes to the Cairo Film Festival to watch nude scenes. It was well known that the Cairo Film Festival at the time used to show uncensored foreign films and that the main reason most people went there was in the hope of seeing such nude scenes. Ḥasan and his friend’s disappointment is therefore great when they find that the film is the historical film *1492 – Conquest of Paradise* and does not include any such scenes at all. As they sit down waiting for the film to start, an equally sexually deprived and overweight youth squeezes in next to ‘Ādil Imām. ‘Ādil Imām looks at him and asks:

‘Ādil Imām: Have we met before?

‘Alā’ Walīy al-Dīn: I don’t know.
 ‘Ādil Imām: Do you go to the Mugamma’
 ‘Alā’ Walīy al-Dīn: Yes, but I’ve been there only once

The audience recognises him as Samīr Basyūnī (‘Alā’ Walīy al-Dīn); one of the other frustrated and marginalised citizens who, in the previous film (which will be discussed in the second section of this chapter), had joined in and helped the ‘terrorist’.

²² In the ‘speech’ ‘Ādil Imām makes fun of fake democracy: “We are practising the most beautiful form of democracy. People have the right to protest: we have nothing to say about that. The law ensures for them that right. But I too, I have the right to put them in prison”; failed five-year plans: “Everybody will find food to eat! In the next five-year plan people will stay at home unemployed and their salaries will reach them at home. I shall get the country moving by remote control! As if there is anything to do at work anyway. What have we done at work?”; and finally, the idea of confrontation – which is central in both films – itself: “But we have to confront and confront. We have to get used to confrontation, because that’s the right path. But let us question: for how long are we going to confront in the coming period? That’s the question that we have to confront.”

²³ Khayriyya al-Bishlāwī (1991) for example writes that, “it seems that the film has not been able to liberate itself from the grip of ‘Ādil Imām, the clown,” and that, “the film includes several scenes that only can be described as ‘clownish’. These scenes are ‘parasitical’ and not needed by the film – exaggerations that only can be explained through the wish to exploit commercially the character of ‘Ādil Imām”.

²⁴ His name could be translated as Aḥmad the Door-opener, or, with a few changes of vowels: *iḥmid fath al-bāb*, which could mean ‘Praise the opening of the door’. If read that way, his name could be interpreted as a sarcastic comment on the changes that continuous liberalisation has caused: changes that neither improved Aḥmad’s situation, nor the citizens’, but since Aḥmad is loyal, he praises them nevertheless.

²⁵ The *Mugamma’* (or the Combine) is a concentration of government departments and agencies in one large twelve storey building on Taḥrīr Square in Cairo. With its thousands of underpaid clerks and bureaucrats, unlabelled doors and narrow hallways, it has become the very symbol of oversized and dysfunctional bureaucracy.

²⁶ ‘To sleep in honey’ (*nāyim fi l-asal*) is a phrase commonly used in colloquial Egyptian to refer to someone who is completely unaware of, or does not care about, what is going on around him.

²⁷ The film basically shares the same idea as Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī’s novel *Incidents in Zaafarani Alley* (*waqā’i’ Ḥārat al-Za’farānī*) from 1976. This did not pass unnoticed by the author who, when he learned that Waḥīd Ḥāmid had a script based on the same idea, protested (he wrote an article in *al-Akḥbār* in which he threatened to take legal action) and accused Waḥīd Ḥāmid of having stolen the idea from his novel. Waḥīd Ḥāmid, for his part, claimed that he had known nothing about Gamāl al-Ghīṭānī’s novel and he claims that his film was inspired by real incidents. He asserts that the film’s real inspiration is an incident that took place a few years earlier when several girls fainted for an unknown reason. He had just changed the ‘collective fainting’ into a ‘collective impotence’ for the meaning this gives (Usāma Salāma, 1995). It is not uncommon in Egypt that accusations of having violated the protection of intellectual property are levelled at film scripts. Three years earlier the Syrian writer Muḥammad al-Māghūṭ had claimed that *Terrorism and Barbeque* had been taken from his script for *The Traveller* (*al-Musāfir*), a Syrian film that was under production; and again in 1997 the same writer

claimed that the film *A Message to the Ruler* derived from his play *The Clown (al-Muharrij)* (N. N., 1998a). *A Message to the Ruler* was also taken to court by another writer, Nabīl Fārūq, who maintained that the film was a 'copy' of his novel *The Mission [al-Muhimma]* published in 1995 (N. N., 1997).

²⁸ 'Ādil Imām's visit to Asyūṭ has become one of his most famous 'performances'. It is an ever-returning topic in most of his interviews. The whole trip was filmed by the prominent Egyptian TV director Yaḥyā al-ʿAlamī, and the TV interview with 'Ādil Imām by Hāla Sarḥān (2006) was, for example, juxtaposed with scenes from the trip and longer sequences of his speech edited with the accompaniment of emotional music.

²⁹ In 'Ādil Imām's *Ramadan on the Volcano* (1985) there is an implicit connection with Islamic Investment ventures (Armbrust 1998, p.296) such as the infamous Rayyān Company. The government had accused this company of running a pyramid scheme, but many believed it was closed down because of its connection to the Islamists (ibid, p. 296). In the film there is a scene in which Ramaḍān sits at his desk taking in money from unsuspecting customers while uttering pious phrases. On the wall behind him hangs a framed Qur'anic verse, and the camera zooms in on the prayer beads Ramaḍān fingers with, as he induces people to trust him with their money (ibid, p. 297). One year later the connection between Islamic investors as swindlers was made more explicit in *Portable Police-Post [Karākōn fī al-Shārī]*. The Qur'anic verse on the wall was more elaborate and the swindler now had a beard and wore a *jallābiyya*. The scene also featured a stern female secretary in *ḥijāb* (ibid, p. 299: footnote 14).

³⁰ The series, which consists of approximately thirty episodes, followed the lives of the inhabitants of a residential building in a middle-class suburb of Cairo, where one of the families was cast as the guardian of Egyptian values and customs, with the father portrayed as an upright character who sets out to reveal the falsehood of the Islamists (Ismail, 2003, p. 67).

³¹ This was a televised series of public confessions by former members of Islamic groups. These 'repentants', known as *al-tā'ibūn*, were not only made to repent publicly for their own actions but also to condemn the actions of the militants generally. Their 'star' was 'Ādil 'Abd al-Bāqī, who had been an *amīr* (leader) of an Islamist cell within the al-Shawqiyyūn group and had close contacts with prominent Jihād figures. His televised 'interview' was broadcast over three consecutive evenings (Ismail, 2003, p. 67)

³² In an interview with Walter Armbrust Nādir Galāl denied that there was any such deal (Armbrust, 2002a, p. 930: footnote 23).

³³ This could actually be suspected of several of 'Ādil Imām's films. *Terrorism and Barbecue* (1992), *Prince of Darkness* (2002), *The Danish Experiment* (2003), *A Groom from the Security Apparatus* (2004) and *The Embassy is in the Building* (2005) list 'Iṣām Imām, 'Ādil Imām's brother, as their producer, and *Playing with the Grownups* (1991), *The Forgotten One* (1993), *Birds of Darkness* (1995) and *Sleeping in Honey* (1996) were produced by Waḥīd Ḥāmid's own production company, Aflām Waḥīd Ḥāmid.

³⁴ Armbrust (2002a: footnote 24) notes that "the match was instantly recognisable. Egypt had in reality won 2-1, but the world soccer officials determined that the behaviour of the Egyptian crowd had intimidated the visitors to the point that it had to be replayed on a neutral field (Lyon). The match ended 0-0 and as a result Egypt did not make it to the World Cup Finals."

³⁵ A *ḥisba* lawsuit is a lawsuit based on the Islamic injunction of '*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-l-nahy 'an al-munkar*' (to enjoin good and forbid evil). This legislation in Islamic jurisprudence enabled individual Muslims to defend

matters of faith in the public arena and hold fellow citizens and the state accountable for the upholding of religious virtue. In Egypt, *ḥisba* gives all Egyptians the right to file lawsuits in cases where they perceive that an exalted right of God has been violated. The *ḥisba* legislation has become a tool in the hands of Egypt's conservative religious establishment to enforce orthodoxy.

³⁶ In 1993 the notorious *ḥisba* lawyer Shaykh Yūsuf al-Badrī attempted to enforce morality in the public space by filing a lawsuit against billboard advertisements which he and his group deemed morally offensive. The question of religious orthodoxy was fought out in a case brought by *ḥisba* lawyers against Yūsuf Shāhīn's film *The Emigrant* [*al-Muhāgīr*] (1994). The lawyers sought to ban the film on the grounds that its portrayal of Joseph strayed from the Text and that the depiction of prophets was in any case illicit.

³⁷ The football appears several times throughout the film, and in the final scene the two 'teams', now both in prison together, kick the ball out of the prison yard, over the skyline and right into the viewer's face, smashing his TV screen.

³⁸ An example of this use is when, after a terrorist attack in Sharm al-Shaykh in 2005, 'Ādil Imām held an improvised speech from the stage after his play *The Bodyguard*, which made the audience, to a large extent Gulf Arabs, respond and shout after him "Down with terrorism, down with the birds of darkness, down with the enemies of humanity!" (N. N., 2005a).

³⁹ In 1984 'Ādil Imām was sued by the lawyers' association for his film *The Lawyer* [*al-advūkādū*] on the ground that it had ruined the profession's reputation and he was initially sentenced to a year in prison. The case circulated in the court system for several years before ending in a settlement. It is therefore quite understandable that, when he decided to make another film about lawyers, 'Ādil Imām should take precautions.

⁴⁰ Waḥīd Ḥāmid had previously been involved in a dispute with this lawyer (Tāmīr Samīr Sarāj, 2006). With this background in mind it could be that the film was written by Waḥīd Ḥāmid as a kind of 'answer' to, or 'counterattack' against these lawyers, not unlike Yūsuf Shāhīn's film *Destiny* [*al-Maṣīr*] (1997) which, with its message that 'words can fly and thoughts can't be stopped', was interpreted as a direct response to the Islamists' pressure to ban his 1994 film *The Emigrant*.

⁴¹ Yūsuf al-Badrī claimed that the film had defamed him and demanded that it be banned and that he be awarded one million Egyptian pounds in compensation. In the film 'Alī al-Zinātī sues the governor, the Minister of Culture and the censorship authorities in order to have illicit cinema posters removed from the streets. Since Yūsuf al-Badrī was the only Islamist lawyer who had filed such a case, he maintained that 'Alī al-Zinātī must be him.

⁴² *Bakhit and Adila II: The Bucket and the Teapot* (1997), *Hello America* (2000), *The Embassy is in the Building* (2005), *The Yacoubian Building* (2006) and *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* (2007) all include fundamentalist characters.

⁴³ This alleged Iranian involvement may be the reason why the fundamentalist characters in *The Terrorist* and *Birds of Darkness* are both named 'Alī. 'Alī is, of course, a common Egyptian name, but it is also a name historically connected with Shia Islam.

⁴⁴ The claim that the fundamentalists' aim is to forbid everything is taken to the point of parody in *Bakhit and Adila II*. In his election campaign, Bakhīt ('Ādil Imām) adapts the Brothers' 'enforcing of public moral' and 'curbing of basic freedoms' agenda, and in an attempt to overbid them he announces that: "We demand the

closure of all schools and universities because they corrupt the youth. We demand the prohibition not only of beer and alcohol, but also of mineral water, soft drinks and juice, and especially sugar-cane juice. And we demand the prohibition of cinema, theatre and television, in addition to salmon and pastrami. And we should avoid eating broad beans because it corrupts the intellect.”

⁴⁵ The journalist is clearly meant to resemble the Egyptian anti-fundamentalist journalist Farag Fūda, who was assassinated in 1992. Although in his lifetime he was not celebrated by the government, he was posthumously declared a martyr of freedom of thought and became the very symbol of how this freedom was under threat by the fundamentalists. ‘Ādil Imām was one of the few public figures who showed up at the hospital when Farag Fūda was assassinated. Maḥmūd Ṣalāḥ recalls that “when I rushed to the hospital where the doctors were trying to save his [Farag Fūda’s] life, I was surprised to find only ‘Ādil Imām and my friend the journalist ‘Ādil Ḥamūda outside the operating theatre” (Ṣalāḥ, 2009). He was also the only member of the filmmaking establishment to attend Farag Fūda’s funeral (Armbrust, 1996, p. 250).

⁴⁶ His name is an additional indication that he is a ‘true’ fundamentalist. Al-Ẓāhir is one of the *asmā’ al-ḥusnā* (the 99 names of God mentioned in the Qur’an) and means ‘The Manifest’. In that sense ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir is just a common name meaning ‘Servant of God’. But in normal use *ẓāhir* also means ‘what is apparent’ or ‘visible’, and God is The Knower of what is visible and invisible (*al-‘Ālim bi l-ẓāhir wa-l-khafī*). In that way ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir could become ‘Alī the Servant of the Visible’, thus turning his name into a subtle statement of his, and the fundamentalists’, superficial understanding of the Text.

⁴⁷ The point of the ‘true’ fundamentalist’s stupidity is also made *Hassan and Murqus* (2008) we have a similar scene in which the Coptic preacher (‘Ādil Imām), now confused with a sheikh, is placed in a situation in which he has to deliver fatwa in an Upper Egypt mosque. The audience uncritically accepts whatever he says.

⁴⁸ This sentence (*lā tujādil wa lā tunāqish ya akh ‘Alī*) has become one of the famous quotations from the film and, according to al-Ḥasan (2007), it has entered daily language.

⁴⁹ Also the television series *The Family* tried to criticise this kind of literature, which had become a favourite subject for many popular preachers. In a dialogue with the Islamist amīr and his followers in a mosque, the father of the family and the voice of sound Egyptian values, questions the idea of torment of the crypt/punishment in the grave. But in the series these utterances, which aimed at questioning widespread ideas about the afterlife, backfired. They became the subject of public controversy and required the intervention of al-Azhar to clarify the matter (Ismail, 2003, pp. 67-68).

⁵⁰ Both of ‘Ādil Imām’s sons have entered the cinema industry. Muḥammad Imām, the younger of the two, had his first major role in *The Yacoubian Building*, as Ṭāhā al-Shādhilī. In *Hassan and Murqus* (2008) he played Būlus’s (‘Ādil Imām) son. Also his elder brother Rāmī Imām has collaborated with ‘Ādil Imām in several films. He played Magdī Nūr’s (‘Ādil Imām) son in *Sleeping in Honey* (1996). In 1999 he had his first job as assistant director in *Mahrous, the Minister’s Boy*. To date he has directed six films, two of which are ‘Ādil Imām’s (*Prince of Darkness* (2002) and *Hassan and Murqus* (2008)). He is currently directing ‘Ādil Imām’s *Nagi Atallah Gang* [*Firqat Nāgī ‘Aṭā Allāh*], which will possibly appear in 2009.

⁵¹ In the novel (p. 162) it says that he intended to give her the book *Hijab before Judgement* (*al-ḥijāb qabla al-ḥisāb*). In the film he comes with a whole pile of books, and some of the titles are recognisable (*How to follow the*

⁶⁰ ‘Ādil Imām’s eldest son’s name is Rāmī and he is therefore addressed here as Abū Rāmī in order to give an impression of intimacy.

⁶¹ In the course of only one week the film brought in 2 260 000 EGP, a sum which the first *Bakhit and Adila* film had needed nine weeks to achieve (‘Alī, 1997).

⁶² The word ‘*gardal*’ (bucket), when said about a person, takes on the meaning ‘dolt’ or ‘sucker’, while ‘*kanaka*’ (teapot) calls to mind the Egyptian expression ‘*ḥammūk fi kanaka?*’ (Did they bath you in a teapot) which is used to rebuff someone who has said something nonsensical or absurd.

⁶³ The case was known as ‘the scandal of the drug MPs’ (*faḍīḥat nuwwāb al-kayf*) in the local media. Three MPs were expelled from parliament.

⁶⁴ Amongst those under investigation in the case known as the case of the loan MPs (*nuwwāb al-qurūd*) in the local media, were businessmen and bank directors (Lāshīn, 1997). This last scene could therefore have been a direct comment on this famous corruption case.

⁶⁵ Each wife represents a sector of society. The fallāḥīn are represented by his original wife, the ex-minister’s ex-wife – who he has married – represents the workers, and Mihētab, the ex-minister’s mistress, represents the new private sector (*al-khaṣḥaṣa*). The film thus ends in a parody of ‘social reconciliation’.

⁶⁶ ‘Ādil Imām has on several occasions stated that Sa’īd Ṣāliḥ is one of his best friends. It is well known in Egypt that Sa’īd Ṣāliḥ has long been very ill and that he is unable to take any film roles. Many would therefore interpret this last scene against this background, seeing Sa’īd Ṣāliḥ’s guest appearance in the film as a gesture of goodwill on ‘Ādil Imām’s part towards his old friend. On the other hand the director, Nādir Galāl, confirmed the intertextual use of Sa’īd Ṣāliḥ in the film, saying that “his person is close to that of ‘Ādil Imām, we can imagine the next film, Sa’īd, the Minister’s Boy” (cited from Jīhān Maḥmūd, 1999).

⁶⁷ ‘Ādil Imām’s film *A Message to the Ruler* from 1998 may seem to be an attempt on his part to take up again the thread of consciousness rising from his previous collaboration with Waḥīd Ḥāmid and Sharīf ‘Arafa. The film combines nationalism and vulgarity, but it failed with both critics and audiences, leading many to ask if this was not the end of ‘Ādil Imām’s dominance in Egyptian cinema. In *A Message to the Ruler* ‘Ādil Imām explicitly utilises al-Muwayliḥ’s technique. It is 1807 and the coastal town Rashīd (Rosetta) is being attacked by British troops. The brave but vulgar (there is not one female in the film whose bottom he doesn’t pat) Mameluke warrior Ḥarfūsh Ibn Barqūq al-Rākibdār (‘Ādil Imām) is dispatched to Cairo to deliver the ‘Egypt is in danger’ message to the ruler. But on his way to the capital a time-switch takes place and, not unlike al-Muwayliḥ’s pasha, the brave Mameluke suddenly finds himself in the Cairo of today, exposing its manners and customs, only to realise that his Ottoman rulers have become history and that Egypt is now ruled by an Egyptian president who, according to the film, was elected by the Egyptian people because he was a hero in the October war and won over the Israelis. Also the last *Bakhit and Adila* film, *Hello America*, in which Bakhīt and ‘Adīla travel to America and expose the falseness of the ‘American dream’, differs from the first two parts. Back at zero again (we are told that they have been expelled from Parliament because of their ‘honesty’), the couple try their luck with Bakhīt’s cousin, who lives in New York. Much as in *The Terrorist*, Bakhīt and ‘Adīla are stranded in the bourgeois milieu of Bakhīt’s uncle. But unlike in *The Terrorist*, in which ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Ẓāhir was ‘elevated’ out of his fundamentalism through his contact with middle-class values, *Hello America* turns these values upside down. Although the couple is just as vulgar as in the other *Bakhit and Adila* films, their *ibn al-balad*

lower-class identity and values become the embodiment of Egyptian identity contrasted with the ‘other’, here represented by Bakhīt’s uncle, who has lost touch with all traditional Egyptian values. Rather than being elevated as in *The Terrorist*, Bakhīt is, if anything, corrupted by this environment. While the film is based on the same principle of rapid social ascent – through different circumstances Bakhīt becomes a pivotal player in the U.S. presidential elections – the contrast with the ‘other’ and the value system built up around it makes *Hello America* a very identity-charged and value-based film.

⁶⁸ It also seems that these structural changes, which started in the early 1990s, are behind the sudden boom both in cinema going and in film production that took place in the late 1990s. While Egypt at the end of the 1960s had produced over 150 films per year, the deteriorating state of both production facilities and cinemas led to a gradual decline, first in the quality of films but then also in the quantity. The decline in production reached its nadir in 1997 with a meagre 16 films. The trend has since reversed and production is now up to more than 40 films per year.

⁶⁹ Shafik (2007, p. 91) points to this double meaning by claiming that it appears when the title is read in classical Arabic with a slightly different vocalisation: by changing the vocalisation from *tajruba* (experience, experiment) into *tajriba* (temptation). Shafik here has gone unnecessarily far in explaining the point. Both in Modern Standard Arabic (Wehr cites only *tajriba*) and Egyptian Arabic (according to Badawi/Hinds it can be pronounced as both *tagruba* and *tagriba*) the word carries both the meanings without any change in vocalisation.

⁷⁰ One of the film’s titles before ‘Ādil Imām decided on *The Danish Experiment* was *Qadri wa awlādu* (Ḥasan ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ, 2003) meaning Qadrī and his sons, or by changing a vowel, *My Destiny* (qadarī) and its Children.

⁷¹ This construct very much reflects Egypt’s position as what Eve Trout-Powell has called the ‘colonized colonizer’. “The idea of colonization that threatened Egyptians was also a racial construction in which they [i.e. the Egyptians] were deemed un-equals. Nationalists fended off any association with those who were more ‘properly’ the subjects of European imperialism, and who were, in their minds, Africans” (Trout-Powell, 2003, p. 197, cited from Shaun Lopez, 2008, p. 298). In this way Egypt adopted the racist colonial discourse and consequently wrestled with its positionality within this discourse. But it must be added that the comedy in the scene with ‘the tall black southern-Sudanese dude’ is not necessarily derived from his ‘blackness’ but from his extreme tallness. He is tall and stupid (*tawīl wi ahbal*). In Arabic (as in other cultures) there is a connection between being tall and being simple-minded or oafish. Being short, on the other hand, is connected with slyness and cunning. This is in Arabic, for example, expressed in the saying *kullu ṭawīlin ḥabīl wa kullu qaṣīrin makkīr* (every tall man is stupid and every short man is sly).

⁷² His son and daughter bear the names ‘Uday and ‘Aliyā’ because Murgān made his money as an entrepreneur in Arab countries in close collaboration with the governments there. They are named after Ṣaddām Ḥusayn’s son and the queen of Jordan.

⁷³ A twisting of the saying “Learning cannot be measured in gold” (*al-‘ilm lā yukayyal bi-l-ḍaḥab*).

⁷⁴ There has been some speculation on who Murgān Aḥmad Murgān was supposed to portray. ‘Ādil Imām tried to close the door on all such speculation by stating that this film has nothing to do with politics and that it doesn’t aim to represent any specific person (‘Ādil Imām, cited from ‘Abd Allah, 2007). But the similarity in names leads one’s thoughts to ‘Usmān Aḥmad ‘Usmān (1917-1999), the founder of the Arab Contractors (al-

muqāwilūn al-‘arab), the largest Arab contracting firm in the 70s and 80s. ‘Usmān was a close friend and political ally of Sadat and it is said that he was the second most powerful man in Egypt during Sadat's presidency. On the other hand the film's opening scenes showing Murgān's business empire had some similarities to a TV advertisement for ‘Ḥadīd ‘Izz’, leading others to connect the character to the NDP politician and business tycoon Aḥmad ‘Izz.

⁷⁵ ‘*antama*’ is the verbal noun (maṣdar) of ‘*antīm*’. The word is derived from English ‘intimate’. My girlfriend would be termed *antimti*, and a girl in a relationship *mi’antima*.

⁷⁶ ‘Urḥī-marriages are usually clandestine marriages in which a man and a woman draft their own marriage contract without registering it with the authorities. This type of marriage has allegedly become popular amongst youth as a means of legitimising sexual relations without the financial and parental obstacles that a traditional Egyptian marriage presents. As these marriages are rooted in Sunni Islam, they are far from illegal, but they are frowned upon by society, because “by their very definition [they] challenge deeply held norms and beliefs as youths use them to escape parental control and authority” (Bahgat / Afifi 2007, p. 79).

⁷⁷ For me it seems that Murgān here mispronounces the word ‘*dīn*’ (belief/religion). He seems to think that the long vowel ‘ī’ in Egyptian becomes the diphthong ‘ay’ in classical Arabic.

⁷⁸ The line he is unable to memorise, ‘We have fallen into the trap’ (*wa-la-qad waqa’na fī l-fakhh*), itself becomes a comment on what corruption has done to Egypt. As he stands on stage, unable to say the line correctly, his mobile phone rings. It is his assistant calling to try to whisper the line to him. Murgān tells his assistant that he can say it directly to the actor to whom he was supposed to say it, and hands the phone over to him. In the end everybody, apart from Murgān, has memorised the line, and the whole audience is chanting ‘We have fallen into the trap’. The scene also recalls a stunt by the popular lowbrow singer Sha’bān ‘Abd al-Raḥīm, whose phone rang while he was on stage. He answered the phone and thereafter continued the play. The audience found this so funny that from then on the stunt became a part of the play.

⁷⁹ The film's intended title was allegedly *Playing with the Thieves* [*al-La’b ma’a al-Luṣūṣ*]. This title would have linked the film to the nationalist anti-corruption film *Playing with the Grownups*. The title was changed to *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* at ‘Ādil Imām's insistence (‘Abd Allāh, M., 2007).

⁸⁰ Moreover, different ministries often follow different policies (Iman Hamdy, 2006, p. 16). It is, for example, known that the Ministry of Agriculture has long been the most pro-normalisation body, while the Ministry of Culture, at least since, in 1978, Fārūq Ḥusnī took over the position of minister, has refused to open up for any kind of normalisation in the cultural field. His refusal is in line with the consensus amongst the ‘cultural elite’ over a cultural boycott of Israel, a ‘cultural boycott’ which often boils down to the question of whether a person is willing to visit Israel or not, and as a result of which ‘cultural players’ who do visit Israel have been labelled traitors – not by the state but by their colleagues.

⁸¹ Maḥmūd Sa’d in an interview with ‘Ādil Imām emotionally writes: “I couldn’t believe that ‘Ādil Imām had said something like that! The son of al-Ḥilmiyya should go and visit those who killed, and still, kill our sons!?” (Sa’d, 1996).

⁸² Cairo Peace Society: Founded in 1998 by some prominent Egyptian intellectuals as a counterpart to the Israeli Peace Now (See Hamdy, 2000, p. 80)

⁸³ Questioned about normalisation again in connection with these eulogies, ‘Ādil Imām again answered ambiguously. “Everybody is free to think what he likes,” he said. “As long as the government has a peace agreement with Israel and has exchanged ambassadors, it is the citizen’s right to follow the government as much as it is his right to oppose it. This is an issue open to discussion, but what is not acceptable is to vilify an intellectual just because he is pro-normalisation, as they did with ‘Alī Sālīm, who was expelled from the union. It’s a question of personal freedom” (cited from N. N., 1998b).

⁸⁴ QIZs (Qualified Industrial Zones) are industrial parks to be set up in Egypt and Jordan from which goods can be exported duty-free to the US on condition that goods produced in these zones should have a minimum percentage of Israeli components. The QIZ initiative was launched by the US in 1996 to support the Middle East peace process. Egypt had rejected the idea for years, arguing that it was too politically sensitive, but finally signed an agreement in December 2004.

⁸⁵ ‘Azzām ‘Azzām (b. 1963) is an Israeli Arab convicted in Egypt of spying for Israel and jailed for eight years.

⁸⁶ Upon this incident Sharīf sarcastically comments: “They eradicated the traces of the aggression” (*azālū āthār al-‘udwān*). To ‘eradicate the traces of aggression’ was the expression commonly used to mean to re-establish the pre-1967 status.

⁸⁷ Muṣṭafā Bakrī is an Egyptian politician, an independent Member of Parliament and editor of *al-Uṣbū‘*. He is known for his staunch nationalist and anti-normalisation position. It was also he who, a year later, was going to lead the parliamentary campaign to have ‘Ādil Imām’s film *The Yacoubian Building* censored, claiming that the film’s portrayal of homosexuality damaged Egypt’s reputation.

⁸⁸ ‘Alī Sālīm (b. 1936) is a once-prominent Egyptian playwright. He wrote the play *School of Troublemakers*. In 1994 he visited Israel and the same year published the book *My Journey to Israel*. He was labelled a sellout by fellow writers and expelled from the Writers’ Union. He has since been unable to get his plays staged. He is now most famous for being a supporter of normalisation.

⁸⁹ Būsī Samīr is a vulgar Egyptian popular singer and belly dancer. Her first video clip, *Put the dots on the letters*, aroused controversy because of its seductiveness and vulgarity. Her second clip, *It’s him I love* (*baḥibbu huwwa*), was dropped by most TV channels for the same reason.

⁹⁰ The name Shuhdī itself evokes the famous Egyptian communist Shuhdī ‘Aṭiyya (1912-1960) and so adds to the family’s communist aura. When Sharīf befriends the family, he surrounds himself with outdated leftist symbols like Lenin and Mao in order to ingratiate himself with them. Moreover, they seem to lack a real cause. Sharīf’s journalist friend writes for a newspaper called *lā* (No), a paper that is opposed to everything as a matter of principle, and Dāliyyā’s uncle cites Gorky, explaining to Sharīf that “we are born to protest” (*khuliqnā li-na‘tarīd*).

⁹¹ One of several examples is a scene in which Sharīf thinks he is going to meet Dāliyyā for a date. He brings with him a bottle of whisky. But Dāliyyā, who understands their relationship differently, takes him to an anti-normalisation rally. Unprepared, and still with the bottle in his hand, he finds himself in the awkward situation of having to deliver an anti-normalisation speech. He points at the bottle, shouting: “We must boycott goods of this kind,” before throwing the bottle away. But rather than boycott, one of the audiences catches it and disappears with the bottle under his arm.

⁹² When the family later visits Sharīf in his flat, they bring him another book as a present – this time, *City of the Beasts* by Isabel Allende. For Sharīf the title is just as disgusting as the previous one, and he throws the book straight out of the window.

⁹³ The original lines of the poem are as follows:

a turā ḥīna afqa‘u ‘aynākī (I wonder, when I gouge your eyes out)
wa-uthabbitu jawharatayni makānahumā (and put two jewels in their place)
hal turā? (Could you still behold?)
hiya ashyā‘u lā tushtarā (Such cannot be bought)

But ‘Ādil Imām recites:

afqa‘u ‘aynayka (I’ll gouge your eyes out)
wa aḍa‘u makānahumā ḥagarayni (and put two stones (i.e. pipefulls of hashish) in their place)
wa-lākin ayna hashtarī hādhā l-ḥagarayni? (but where should I buy those two stones (pipefulls)?)

⁹⁴ Sha‘bān ‘Abd al-Raḥīm: popular Egyptian sha‘bī-singer. His song *I hate Israel [ana bakrah Isrā’īl]*” with the catchy refrain “But I love ‘Amr Mūsā” (*wa baḥibb ‘Amr Mūsā*) became an instant hit, and is said to be the reason why ‘Amr Mūsā (b. 1936), probably the most popular politician from within the regime, was removed as Minister of Foreign Affairs and appointed to the position of Secretary-General to the ‘impotent’ Arab League (Ḥanān Shūmān, 2005).

⁹⁵ In the middle of all this, the Islamic fundamentalist terrorists enter the scene in their usual stereotypical way, only as a disturbing element. They are not part of it. Again they come from the ‘edge of society’ to exploit the situation for their own ends. In a scene sarcastically criticising suicide-bombers, they kidnap Sharīf, put on him an explosive belt and force him to blow himself up at the embassy, saying “Your place is not here. Your place is up there with the martyrs,” to which Sharīf sarcastically responds: “Am I supposed to go up there alone while you stay here? Why don’t you go up there and leave me alone here?”

⁹⁶ The demonstration gathers people from the Lawyers’ Syndicate (*niqābat al-muḥāmīn*) and then the Press Syndicate (*niqābat al-ṣuḥufiyyīn*). Both have been ‘hot spots’ of, and are associated with, anti-regime demonstrations. Not many months before the release of the film, on the 25th of May 2005, pro-regime thugs had maltreated and sexually harassed demonstrators and journalists in front of the Press Syndicate. Pictures of the incident circulated in the international press. The use by the film of these places as starting points for the popular anti-normalisation (but not anti-regime) demonstrations could thus account for a channelling of these protests into nationalist and pro-regime support.

⁹⁷ ‘Ādil Imām indirectly confirms this. Asked whether it is true that he received 8 million EGP for his role in *Morgan Ahmed Morgan* and now 15 million for his role in the coming film *Bobbo* (2009), he denied having done so, only to burst out laughing and say that what he received was actually much more. He then grew serious again and explained that “an artist will never tell you how much he has received. We consider it a hidden charity (*ḥasana makhfiyya*), and a blessing from God (*rizq min ‘and rabbīnā*)” (‘Ādil Imām, cited from al-Laythī, 2009).

⁹⁸ The Egyptian UN Goodwill ambassadors, all actors, are: ‘Ādil Imām (UNHCR from 2001), Maḥmūd al-Qābil (UNICEF from 2003), Maḥmūd Yāsīn (WFP from 2004), Yusrā (UNDP from 2006) and Khālīd Abū al-Nagā (UNICEF from 2007) (UN in Egypt, 2007).

⁹⁹ The production was directed by Sharīf ‘Arafa, a soundtrack was provided by the celebrated composer ‘Ammār al-Sharīf and a lot of war and historical footage was used. The interview focused on Ḥusnī Mubārak’s role in history, and through a series of anecdotes and narratives the President gave the viewers an unprecedented insight into his character and life, with ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Adīb trying to underline the President’s unique qualities as a leader of the nation. Although in the interview the President claimed that he had not yet made up his mind on whether he would nominate himself or not, many observers suspected the production to be the opening of his campaign for re-election, which started in September the same year (Nevine Khalil, 2005).

¹⁰⁰ News agencies wrote after the premiere of *The Yacoubian Building* at the Cairo Opera House that the author ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī was barred from attending the opening. ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī told AFP that “a bunch of ministers and dignitaries of the regime were invited, but that I was undesirable”, adding that “it was not the producers, but the authorities who rejected my attendance because I am a member of the opposition movement Kifāyā” (cited from N. N., 2006c?).

¹⁰¹ ‘Abd al-Ghanī Dāwūd in al-‘Arabī asks whether ‘Imād al-Dīn Adīb’s intention with the film was to show that he is not only able to support the regime but also to do the opposite (Dāwūd, 2006), and in *al-Mūjaz* 04.07.2006 there is an article with the headline “‘Imād al-Dīn Adīb’s riddle: He adopts the state’s and the opposition’s position simultaneously” (N. N., 2006b).

¹⁰² In Egypt it can seem that the novel had less to do with the film’s success. A questionnaire distributed to 50 individuals from the audience revealed that only 14% could identify ‘Alā’ al-Aswānī as the writer of the novel (half of them had read it), while 66% answered that Waḥīd Ḥāmid wrote the novel and 20% said ‘don’t know’ (Amānī Ḥāfiẓ al-Ḥifnāwī, 2006). The film was heavily marketed in Egypt. Promotion focused on it being Egypt’s biggest cinematic production ever, and the most important film of the century, and that it contained an unrecorded number of stars. The film premiered at the Berlin International Film festival a few months before it was released in Egypt. Although it failed to win an award, its positive reception in the West was exploited in its local promotion.

¹⁰³ The campaign was supported by a total of 112 MPs, both conservative Islamists and MPs from the ruling NDP. They demanded that several scenes, especially the scenes of homosexuality, that according to Bakrī, were “spreading obscenity and debauchery,” should be censored (cited from N. N., 2006a).

¹⁰⁴ In the film he appears once. Al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām visits him at his Islamic Charitable Society to seek his advice on what to do about his ‘wet dreams’, and the sheikh advises him to take a second wife (pp. 74-75). But in the novel the sheikh appears a second time (pp. 242-247). The novel relates how he is busy justifying the liberation of Kuwait by US troops. Al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām again needs the sheikh’s help. His second wife, Su‘ād, is pregnant and al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām takes the sheikh with him to try to convince her to have an abortion. This scene – much more compromising for ‘official’ Islam – has been omitted in the film.

¹⁰⁵ The bulk of Shaykh Shākir’s speech in the film is taken directly from the novel (pp.132-138). Both in the film and in the novel (p. 134) the Shaykh says: “Our leaders claim that they rule us by the laws of Islamic sharī‘a and that they implement democracy and God knows that they are lying on both counts. Islamic sharī‘a is suspended in our afflicted country.” The film omits that “We are ruled by French secular law that legalises drunkenness, adultery and homosexuality.” Film and novel then continue with “and the government earns

money from gambling and the sale of alcohol,” but the film adds “from insolent tourism” (*wa min al-siyāha al-wāfida al-fāgira*) before both go on to say that this illicit money is then turned into government salaries, feeding people from illicit sources and afflicting them with the curse of the illicit.

¹⁰⁶ The dialogue in the novel criticising ‘Abd al-Nāṣir (pp. 228-229), and which probably is the dialogue Ṣabrī Ḥāfiẓ alluded to in his article, goes as follows:

Zakī al-Disūqī: ‘Abd al-Nāṣir was the worst ruler in the history of Egypt. He ruined the country and gave us defeat and poverty. The damage to the Egyptian’s personality that he caused will take years to repair. ‘Abd al-Nāṣir taught the Egyptians cowardice, opportunism and hypocrisy.

Buthayna: Why do people love him then?

Zakī al-Disūqī: Who said that people love him?

Buthayna: A lot of people I know love him.

Zakī al-Disūqī: Those loving ‘Abd al-Nāṣir must either be ignorant or profiting [from him]. The free officers were a bunch of kids from the scum of society ... destitutes sons of destitutes .. al-Naḥḥās Bāsha was a good guy. He sympathised with the poor and allowed them to enrol at the Military Academy, and the result was the coup d’état in ‘52. They ruled Egypt, robbed and plundered the country and made millions. Of course they love ‘Abd al-Nāṣir. He was the leader of the gang (al-‘iṣāba).

¹⁰⁷ The dialogue (p. 282) goes as follows:

Zakī al-Disūqī: Do you still hate the country? I am unable to understand your generation. In my day patriotism was like a religion. A lot of young people died fighting the British.

Buthayna: You were demonstrating to throw out the British? They left ... Does that mean that the country is okay now?

Zakī al-Disūqī: The reason for the deteriorating state of the country is the lack of democracy. If there had been real democracy, Egypt would have been a great power. Egypt’s tragedy is dictatorship, and dictatorship only leads to poverty, corruption and failure in all fields.

¹⁰⁸ I have not been able to find any source confirming that parts of the film have been censored or scenes cut. On the other hand I have heard rumours that the film was censored, and most of these rumours mention the absence of ‘The Big One’. The cinema version of the film is about 165 minutes long, as is my DVD. ‘Ādil Adīb, representative of Good News, confirms that another 45 minutes had been removed, but that this was done in order to make the film suitable for screening in cinemas (cited from Muḥammad al-Miṣrī, 2006), as there in Egypt are three hours between each show.

¹⁰⁹ Another example on how the President is omitted from criticism in the film is when Ṭāhā is refused admittance to the Police School on the ground that his father works as a doorman (bawwāb). In the novel he writes a letter of complaint to the President (pp. 86 and 96-97). This complaint has been omitted in the film. There is also no mention of the fact that Ṭāhā could have been admitted if he had paid a bribe of 20,000 EGP.

¹¹⁰ There are a lot of rumours around Kamāl al-Shādhilī and *The Yacoubian Building*. Some people claim that the novel was the reason why half of his portfolio was abruptly taken away from him. Moreover, it is rumoured that the film angered him and that he held that it should have been forbidden because it damaged the reputation of the NDP. Allegedly Kamāl al-Shādhilī was angry with Ṣafwat al-Sharīf because he had licensed

the film and a dispute between the two NDP tops erupted. It is also rumoured that Kamāl al-Shādhilī himself was the ‘hidden hand’ behind the parliamentary campaign to have the film censored.

¹¹¹ This sentence, especially “Egypt has become too cruel to its people (*maṣr ba’it ‘asya ‘awi ‘ala ahlaha*),” was one of the famous statements. The dialogue is taken from the novel (p. 193), but her statement has been heavily altered and this sentence is not present in the novel. In the novel her statement ends with “Then you would understand why we hate Egypt.” In the film she does not love Egypt, but she doesn’t say directly that she hates her country. When, in the novel, Zakī asks Buthayna if she hates her country, she answers: “Of course.” When asked the same question in the film she answers: “Has it [i.e. the country] given me anything to make me love it?” (*wa-na shuft minha ḥāga ḥilwa ‘ashān aḥibbaha?*).

¹¹² The dialogue in which this statement appears is similar to that in the novel (p.191), but the point of making a comparison between Egypt and foreign countries is more clearly stated in the film. Zakī al-Disūqī wants to offer Buthayna a drink. When she refuses, he says: “What a pity”. In the novel he goes on to explain that to drink is something pleasant and that foreigners know the value of alcohol. In the film, on the other hand, he goes on: “I pity the difference that is between us and foreigners. Foreigners know how to value alcohol.” He then adds the comparison that “here we value hashish. There is a big difference between the two,” i.e. not only between alcohol and hashish but also between Egyptians and foreigners. The sentence which appears to be one of the more memorable in the film actually seems to have been subverted by some audiences. While the hashish in the statement is presented as a ‘negative’ marker, audiences who reportedly were clapping the comment (Du‘ā Sulṭān, 2006), subverted it into a ‘positive’ marker taking pride in not drinking alcohol. To make the comparison between positively charged western and negatively charged Egyptian values clearer, the scene starts with al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām and is followed by him too. The above-mentioned dialogue starts when Zakī and Buthayna see al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām on television, where – like many conservative and reactionary MP’s – he is complaining about what all the ‘nakedness’ on TV does to our girls and women. After the dialogue between Zakī and Buthayna, the camera shows crowded streets in central Cairo to the music of an Edith Piaf song, before we are taken into the flat of al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām, where he smokes hashish. The contrast between Zakī’s elevated western values and al-Ḥāgg ‘Azzām’s corrupted version of eastern values is thus made clear.

¹¹³ The novel insists on using the old pre-revolution name of the street and the square, Sulaymān Bāshā. After the revolution, the old statue of Sulaymān Bāshā was replaced with one of the national hero Ṭal‘at Ḥarb, and both the street and the square were renamed accordingly, but the old name remained in popular use, especially among the elderly and people who refused to accept the new revolutionary order.

¹¹⁴ This monologue is partly taken from the conversation between Zakī al-Disūqī and Buthayna at the Maxim Restaurant in the novel (p. 228).

¹¹⁵ This has been changed from the novel. In the novel (pp. 326-338) Ḥātim finds ‘Abd Rabbuh again and brings him back. They agree to have sex one last time, and the novel clearly gives the impression that also ‘Abd Rabbuh enjoys this. But when he, Ḥātim, thereafter breaks the agreement and desperately begs ‘Abd Rabbuh to stay, they start to fight. Ḥātim threatens him and in anger ‘Abd Rabbuh kills him. In the film ‘Abd Rabbuh is more passive than in the novel. While in the novel he actively takes part in the homosexual relationship and enjoys it, the film focuses more on him as a victim corrupted by Ḥātim. After he has been punished by God through his son’s death, he returns to his original life. Ḥātim has therefore to be punished by a third party.

¹¹⁶ Because of the absence of 'The Big One', al-Ḥāgg 'Azzām's story from here on differs from that in the novel. Al-Ḥāgg 'Azzām only yields to al-Fūlī's pressure after the Drug Squad raids his business and confiscates drugs. When al-Ḥāgg 'Azzām becomes more compliant al-Fūlī closes his police file.

¹¹⁷ *Playing with the Grownups* (1991), *Terrorism and Barbecue* (1992), *The Forgotten One* (1993) and *Sleeping with Honey* (1996), all scripted by Waḥīd Ḥāmid, and *The Terrorist* (1994), scripted by Līnīn al-Ramlī, all firmly belong to this period. *Birds of Darkness* (1995), scripted by Waḥīd Ḥāmid, has a foot both in this and in the following period. With the exception of *The Terrorist*, which was directed by Nādir Galāl, all these films were directed by Sharīf 'Arafa.

¹¹⁸ This period includes the *Bakhit and Adila* trilogy (1995, 1997 and 2000) by Līnīn al-Ramlī, *The Message to the Ruler* (1998) and 'Ādil Imām's first film scripted by Yūsuf Ma'āṭī, *Mahrous, the Minister's Boy* (1999). All these films were directed by Nādir Galāl.

¹¹⁹ This period includes all the films scripted by Yūsuf Ma'āṭī (2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2008) with the exception of *Mahrous, the Minister's Boy* (1999). It also includes *The Yacoubian Building* (2006). *Prince of Darkness* (2002), which was probably an experiment in which 'Ādil Imām collaborated with the younger generation of film-makers holds an intermediate position between this and the preceding period. In this period 'Ādil Imām collaborated with various directors ('Alī Idrīs (2003, 2004 and 2007)), his son Rāmī Imām (2002 and 2008), Sharīf 'Arafa's son 'Amr 'Arafa (2005) and Waḥīd Ḥāmid's son Marwān Ḥāmid (2006)).

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